FROM A DISTANCE, THE MILKY WAY GALAXY LOOKS MUCH THE SAME IN THE 31ST CENTURY AS IT DID IN THE 21ST.

IT WHEELS ON OBLIVIOUS TO THE CONCERNS OF ITS INHABITANTS, THE COMPLEX STELLAR MACHINERIES CHURNING OUT TERRIBLE ENERGIES THAT YOU MIGHT BE ABLE TO MEASURE IN TERAWATT-NANOSECONDS... IF YOU WERE ALLOWED ENOUGH ZEROS.

CLOSER IN, HOWEVER, THE VAST MAJORITY OF THAT CHURNING, BURNING SPIRAL IS JUST EMPTY SPACE, SPECKLED WITH THE OCCASIONAL LONELY MOLECULE.

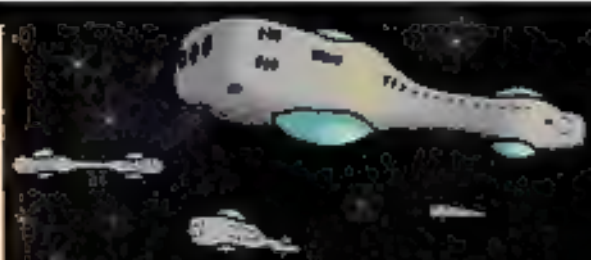
IN SHORT, MOST OF IT IS QUITE BORING.

Schlock Mercenary

COME TO THINK OF IT, THOUGH, STELLAR FUSION AND SINGULAR ANNIHILATION ARE ULTIMATELY RATHER REPETITIVE. THUS, THE STARS AND THE GALACTIC CORE TELL BORING STORIES TOO.

IT'S ONLY IN THE BORDERS, SOMEWHERE BETWEEN THOSE LONELY, LOFTY BLACKNESSES AND THE INFERNALLY CRUSHING DEPTHS, THAT WE FIND ANYTHING OF DRAMATIC SIGNIFICANCE.

YOU ASKED FOR DRAMA? HERE FLY FLEETS OF GIANT WARSHIPS, WHO ARE IN THEIR OWN TURN WIELDING AND UNLEASHING TERRIBLE ENERGIES AS THE FIRST PAN-GALACTIC CONFLICT IN THAT INTERRACIAL MEMORY KNOWN AS 'RECORDED HISTORY' UNFOLDS IN ALL ITS BLOODY, BLISTERING, MAJESTY.



HISTORY, EVEN IN THE MAKING, IS FAIRLY DULL. IT LACKS PERSONALITY. WAR AND PEACE... WE ALL KNOW IT REPEATS ITSELF.

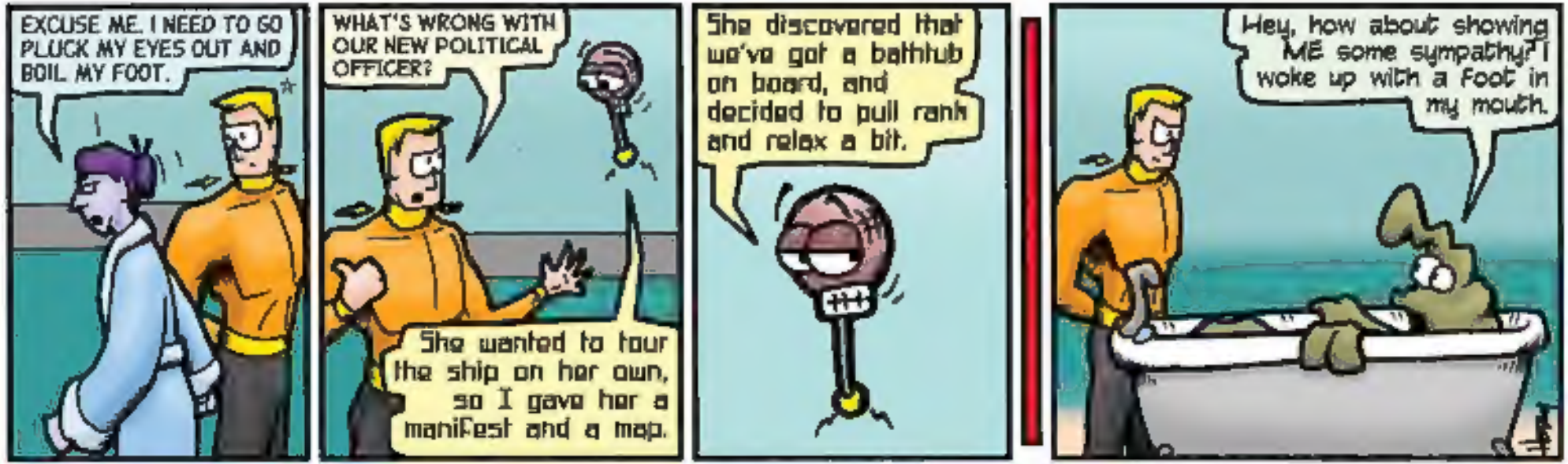
YOU WANT DRAMA? IN THE INHABITED BORDER-LANDS BETWEEN THE STARS AND THE NOTHINGNESS, IN THE TURBULENT INTERSTITIALS BETWEEN THE WAR AND THE PEACE WE FIND ENORMOUS POTENTIAL ENERGY. IT IS WITHIN THESE TURBULENT FRINGES, THESE BORDERS WITHIN THE BORDERS, THAT LIFE GETS EXCITING, AND WE BEGIN OUR STORY:

WELCOME TO SOL SYSTEM, WHERE, ABOARD A SMALL MERCENARY SHIP, MONEY HAS BEEN ACCEPTED FOR BETRAYAL, TREASON WILL BE REPAID WITH TREACHERY, AND RESISTANCE SHALL BE MET WITH IRRESISTABLE FORCE.

The infomercial channel is running repeats again.

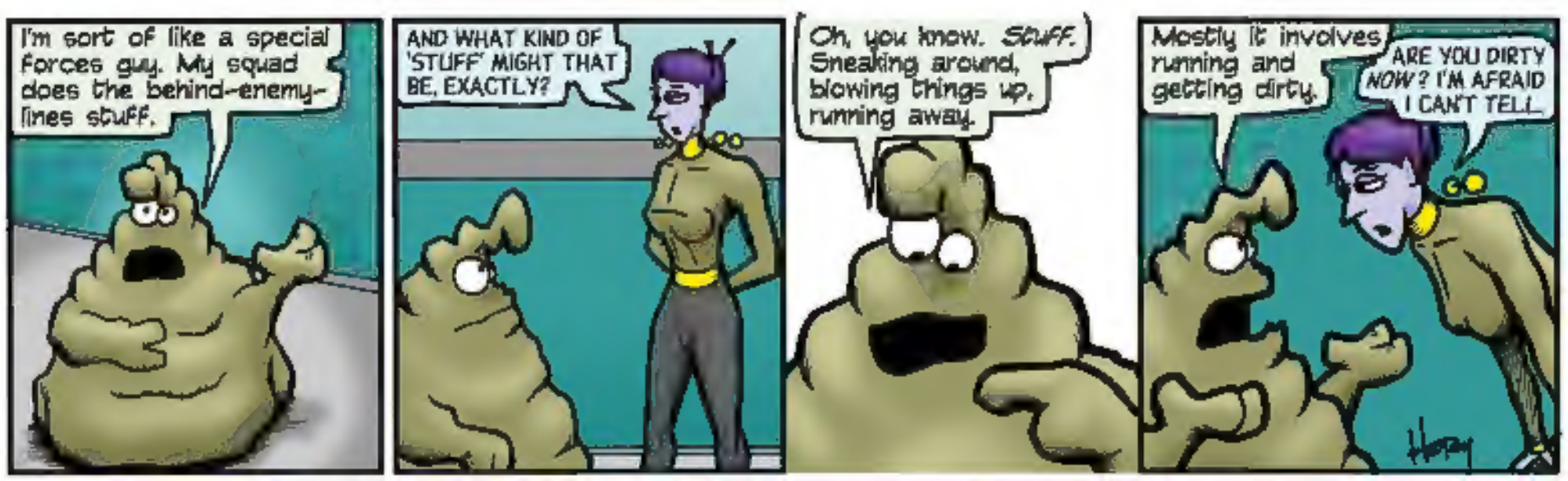
Oooh, I love this one. Makes me wish I had feet that could get smelly.

OF COURSE, NOTHING'S HAPPENING YET.


EXCUSE ME. I NEED TO GO PLUCK MY EYES OUT AND BOIL MY FOOT.
WHAT'S WRONG WITH OUR NEW POLITICAL OFFICER?
She wanted to tour the ship on her own, so I gave her a manifest and a map.
She discovered that we've got a bathtub on board, and decided to pull rank and relax a bit.
Hey, how about showing ME some sympathy? I woke up with a foot in my mouth.

COLONEL, SERGEANT SCHLOCK TELLS ME THAT HE IS VERY SORRY THAT YOU STEPPED IN HIM. HE KNOWS YOU'RE UPSET, AND HOPES YOU'LL FORGIVE HIM FOR BEING SO UGLY AND SLIMY.
Ahem.
HE WAS CURIOUS, THOUGH... WHY WERE YOU TRYING TO TAKE A BATH IN THE DARK?
I'M A PLIRP. I'VE GOT PHOTOSYNTHETIC SKIN. NO LIGHT MEANS NO PHOTOSYNTHESIS.
NO PHOTOSYNTHESIS MEANS NO BONUS SUGARS. YOU SEE, I PREFER TO *TASTE* THE CALORIES I'M GOING TO HAVE TO BURN OFF.
You could have taken a bath with your clothes *on*.
AFTER STEPPING IN YOU I'M WISHING I'D TRIED THAT FIRST.

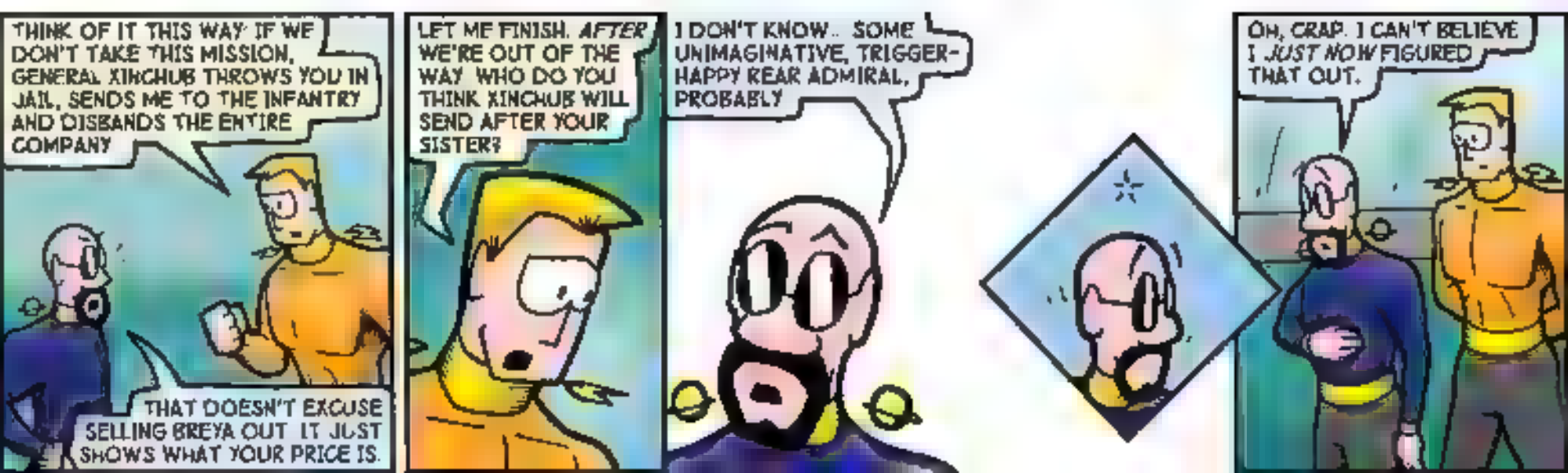
OKAY, SERGEANT, WE'VE MET. I'M OVER IT. NOW, I'D LIKE FOR YOU TO TELL ME WHAT EXACTLY YOU *DO* FOR THIS OUTFIT.
BESIDES LURKING IN BATHTUBS AND STARTLING NAKED WOMEN, OF COURSE.
You're not over it yet. Admit it.
SO YOU'RE ON THE PSYCHOLOGICAL WARFARE TEAM, THEN?


I'm sort of like a special forces guy. My squad does the behind-enemy-lines stuff.
AND WHAT KIND OF 'STUFF' MIGHT THAT BE, EXACTLY?
Oh, you know. *STUFF.* Sneaking around, blowing things up, running away.
Mostly it involves running and getting dirty.
ARE YOU DIRTY *NOW*? I'M AFRAID I CAN'T TELL.

SPECIAL FORCES BREEDS A CERTAIN KIND OF PARANOIA. I'M SURPRISED THAT YOU'RE NOT ARMED, SERGEANT.
RUMMAGE RUMMAGE
Who says I'm not armed?
NOW THAT I KNOW WHERE YOU KEEP THEM, I WON'T BE INCLINED TO BORROW THEM.

IT'S AN INTERESTING ASSORTMENT YOU'VE GOT THERE, SERGEANT SCHLOCK.
THE SAWED-OFF MULTI-CANNONS I CAN UNDERSTAND, BUT WHY THE OLD-STYLE BH-209 PLASGUN?
YOU DO KNOW YOU CAN GET TEN TIMES THE OUTPUT FROM A WEAPON LESS THAN A TENTH THAT SIZE, DON'T YOU?
I like the soothing sounds I get out of this one.
OMMMMMOUS HUMMMMMM
THE GLOW OF DOOM FROM THE BARREL IS A NICE EFFECT, TOO.

Schlock Mercenary


THINK OF IT THIS WAY: IF WE DON'T TAKE THIS MISSION, GENERAL XINCHUB THROWS YOU IN JAIL, SENDS ME TO THE INFANTRY AND DISBANDS THE ENTIRE COMPANY
THAT DOESN'T EXCUSE SELLING BREYA OUT. IT JUST SHOWS WHAT YOUR PRICE IS.
LET ME FINISH. *AFTER* WE'RE OUT OF THE WAY WHO DO YOU THINK XINCHUB WILL SEND AFTER YOUR SISTER?
I DON'T KNOW... SOME UNIMAGINATIVE, TRIGGER-HAPPY REAR ADMIRAL, PROBABLY
OH, CRAP. I CAN'T BELIEVE I *JUST NOW* FIGURED THAT OUT.

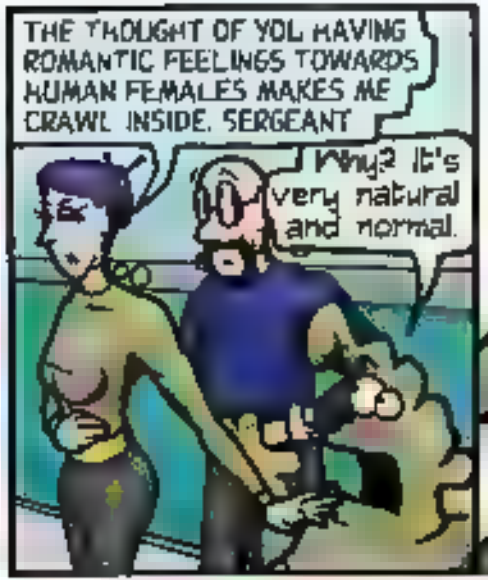
NOW LISTEN CLOSELY. OUR CONTRACT STATES THAT WE COLLECT PAY NOT AS A COMPANY BUT AS IF WE WERE ALL U.N.S. SOLDIERS.
THAT MEANS "TIME SPENT" RATHER THAN "OBJECTIVE ACHIEVED." WE DON'T ACTUALLY HAVE TO *FIND* YOUR SISTER OR THOSE MISSING U.N.S. SHIPS.

WITH A LITTLE WORK, WE COULD KEEP THIS GIG UP FOR *YEARS*, AND MANAGE TO MAKE MONEY ON SIDE JOBS AS WE GO.

WE JUST HAVE TO BE THE *CLEVER* MONKEYS, KEVYN.

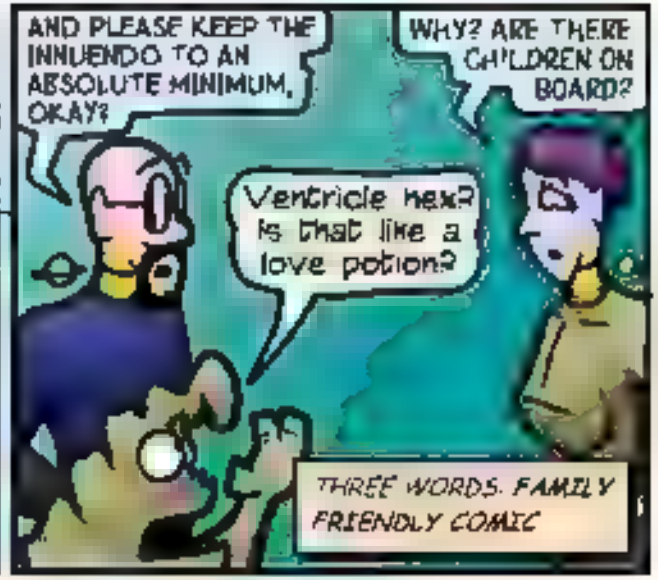
THE *REALLY* CLEVER MONKEYS CAN USE STICKS TO HELP THEM EAT TERMITES.
SHOULD I TRY TO MAKE IT SOUND LIKE WE WERE DISCUSSING THE ZOO, OR DID YOU ALREADY HEAR TOO MUCH?

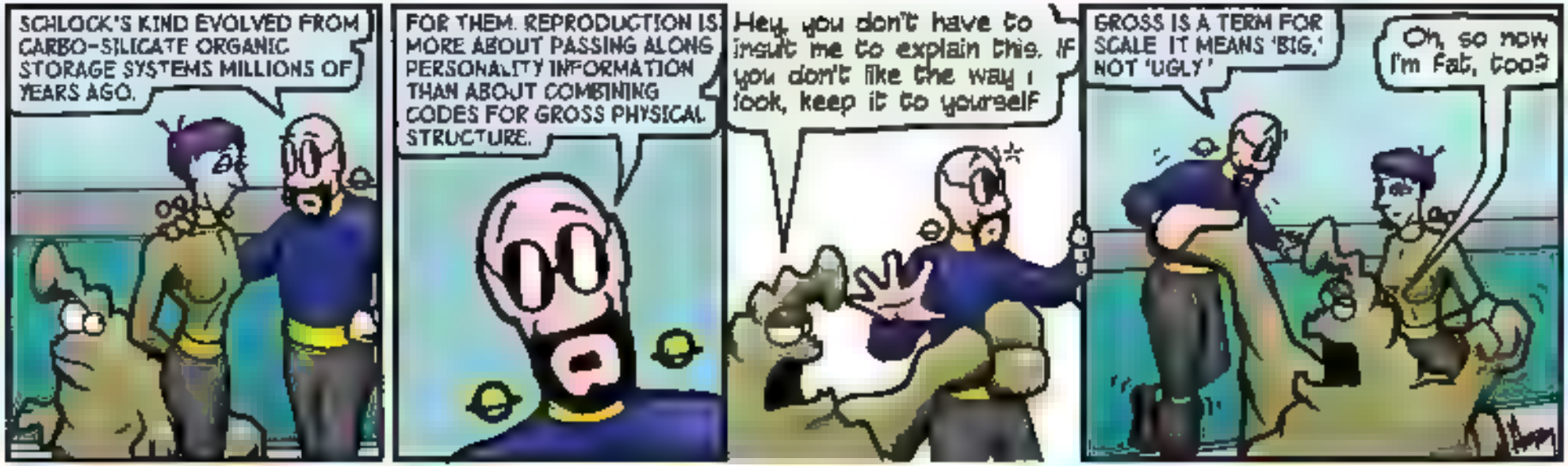
I KNOW YOU ALL FIND THE MISSION DISTURBING. I'VE READ YOUR FILES
OUR TARGET *BREYA ANDREYASN*, WAS YOUR FORMER COMMANDING OFFICER
SHE'S CHARISMATIC, INTELLIGENT, AND WELL LIKED BY PRETTY MUCH EVERYBODY INCLUDING HER BROTHER
THERE'S EVEN REFERENCE IN THOSE FILES TO HER BEING SCHLOCK'S GIRLFRIEND.
THAT'S THE PART THAT DISTURBS *ME*, IF YOU MUST KNOW
And I am *so* over her

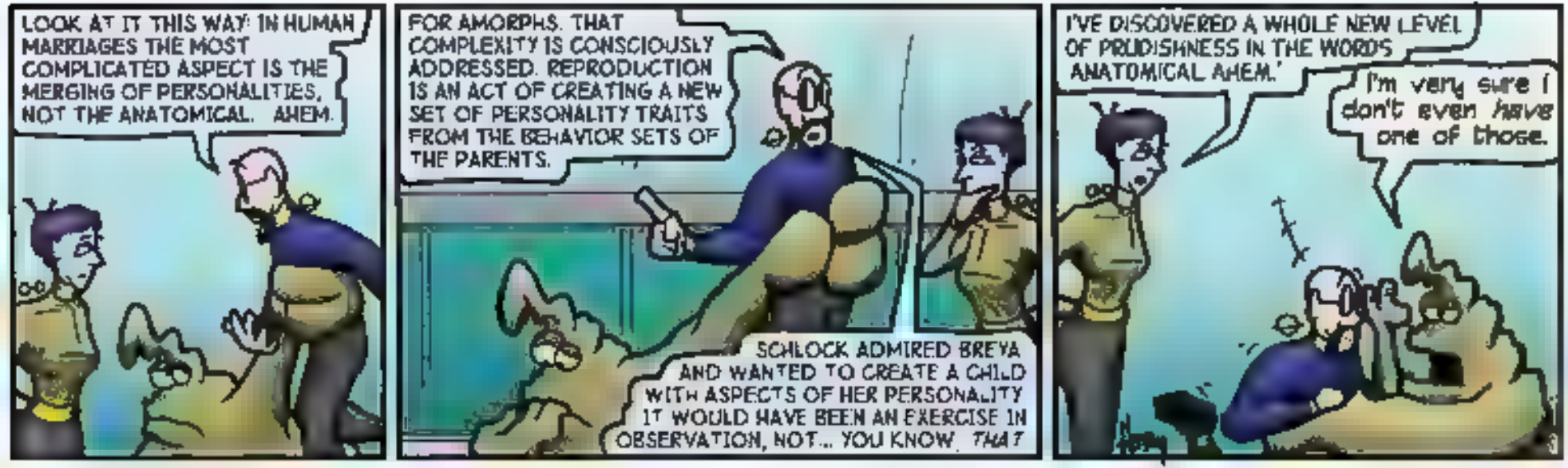

THE THOUGHT OF YOU HAVING ROMANTIC FEELINGS TOWARDS HUMAN FEMALES MAKES ME CRAWL INSIDE, SERGEANT
Why? It's very natural and normal.

CAN EXPLAIN IT IN TWO WORDS, AND THEY RHYME WITH 'PENTACLE REX.'

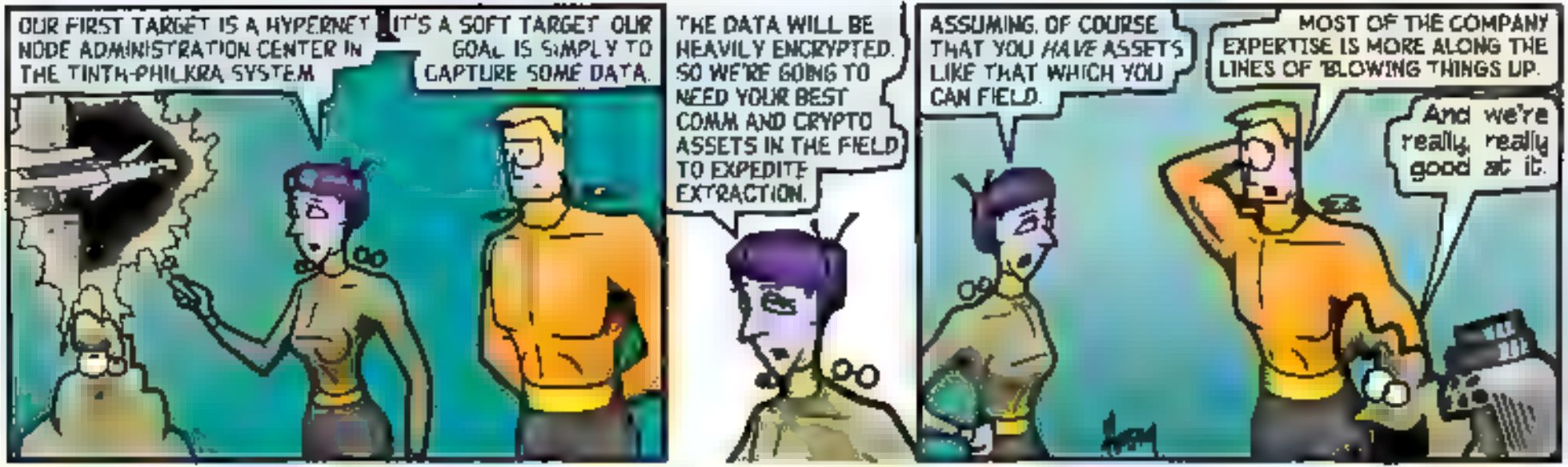
WHEN SCHLOCK EXPLAINED IT TO ME IT WAS A LITTLE CREEPY, BUT THAT WAS *NOT* WHAT IT RHYMED WITH.

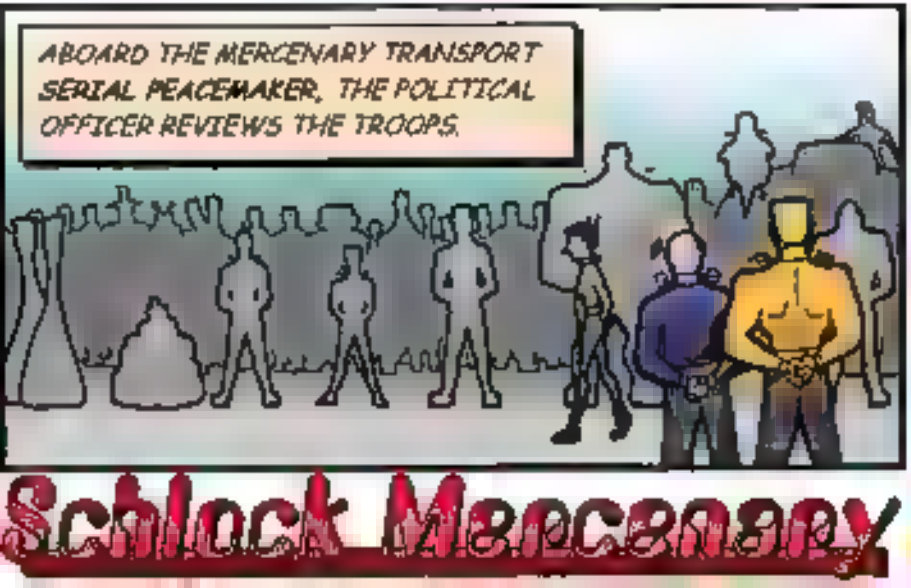

AND PLEASE KEEP THE INNUENDO TO AN ABSOLUTE MINIMUM, OKAY?
WHY? ARE THERE CHILDREN ON BOARD?
Ventricle hex? Is that like a love potion?
THREE WORDS. FAMILY FRIENDLY COMIC

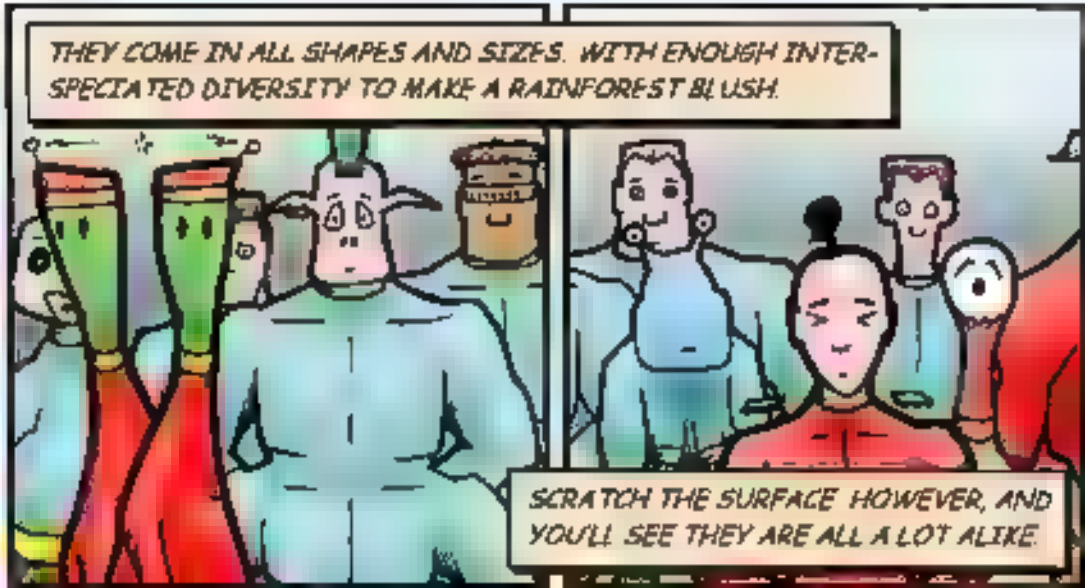

SCHLOCK'S KIND EVOLVED FROM CARBO-SILICATE ORGANIC STORAGE SYSTEMS MILLIONS OF YEARS AGO.
FOR THEM, REPRODUCTION IS MORE ABOUT PASSING ALONG PERSONALITY INFORMATION THAN ABOUT COMBINING CODES FOR GROSS PHYSICAL STRUCTURE.
Hey, you don't have to insult me to explain this. If you don't like the way I look, keep it to yourself
GROSS IS A TERM FOR SCALE IT MEANS 'BIG,' NOT 'UGLY'
Oh, so now I'm fat, too?


LOOK AT IT THIS WAY: IN HUMAN MARRIAGES THE MOST COMPLICATED ASPECT IS THE MERGING OF PERSONALITIES, NOT THE ANATOMICAL. AHEM.
FOR AMORPHS. THAT COMPLEXITY IS CONSCIOUSLY ADDRESSED. REPRODUCTION IS AN ACT OF CREATING A NEW SET OF PERSONALITY TRAITS FROM THE BEHAVIOR SETS OF THE PARENTS.
SCHLOCK ADMIRED BREYA AND WANTED TO CREATE A CHILD WITH ASPECTS OF HER PERSONALITY IT WOULD HAVE BEEN AN EXERCISE IN OBSERVATION, NOT... YOU KNOW. THAT
I'VE DISCOVERED A WHOLE NEW LEVEL OF PRUDISHNESS IN THE WORDS ANATOMICAL AHEM.'
I'm very sure I don't even have one of those.

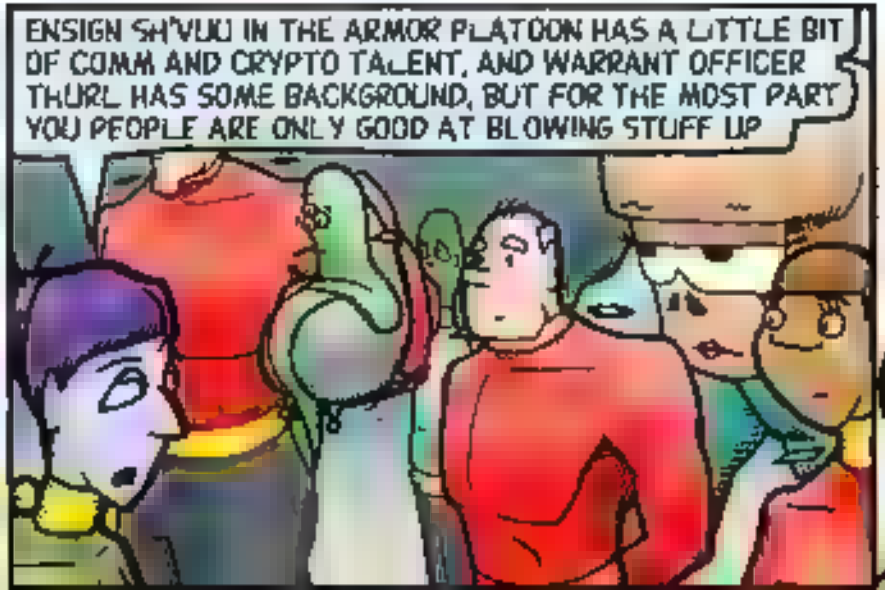
TH S CONVERSATION HAS BEEN NICEL Y DISTRACTING SHALL WE COME BACK TO THE POINT NOW?
WE ARE GOING TO TRACK DOWN YOUR FORMER COMMANDER, YOUR SISTER, AND YOUR EX-GIRLFRIEND, WHO ALL HAPPEN TO BE THE SAME PERSON, AND WE ARE GOING TO DO IT QUICKL Y AND EFFICIENTL Y
WHEN WE FIND HER, WE ARE GOING TO CAPTURE HER, AND COMMANDEER THE U.N.S. DESTROYER ATHENS, THE FRIGATE SARASOTA, AND WHATEVER OTHER FLEET UNITS SHE STILL RETAINS UNDER HER NOW-ILLEGAL COMMAND
AND YOUR EMOTIONS ARE NOT GOING TO GET IN THE WAY
CAN WE LET BEING OUTNUMBERED AND OUTGUNNED GET IN THE WAY?
I hope not. This sounds like fun!


OUR FIRST TARGET IS A HYPERNET NODE ADMINISTRATION CENTER IN THE TINTH-PHILKRA SYSTEM.
IT'S A SOFT TARGET. OUR GOAL IS SIMPLY TO CAPTURE SOME DATA.
THE DATA WILL BE HEAVILY ENCRYPTED. SO WE'RE GOING TO NEED YOUR BEST COMM AND CRYPTO ASSETS IN THE FIELD TO EXPEDITE EXTRACTION.
ASSUMING, OF COURSE THAT YOU *HAVE* ASSETS LIKE THAT WHICH YOU CAN FIELD.
MOST OF THE COMPANY EXPERTISE IS MORE ALONG THE LINES OF BLOWING THINGS UP.
And we're really, really good at it.


ABOARD THE MERCENARY TRANSPORT SERIAL PEACEMAKER, THE POLITICAL OFFICER REVIEWS THE TROOPS.
Schlock Mercenary

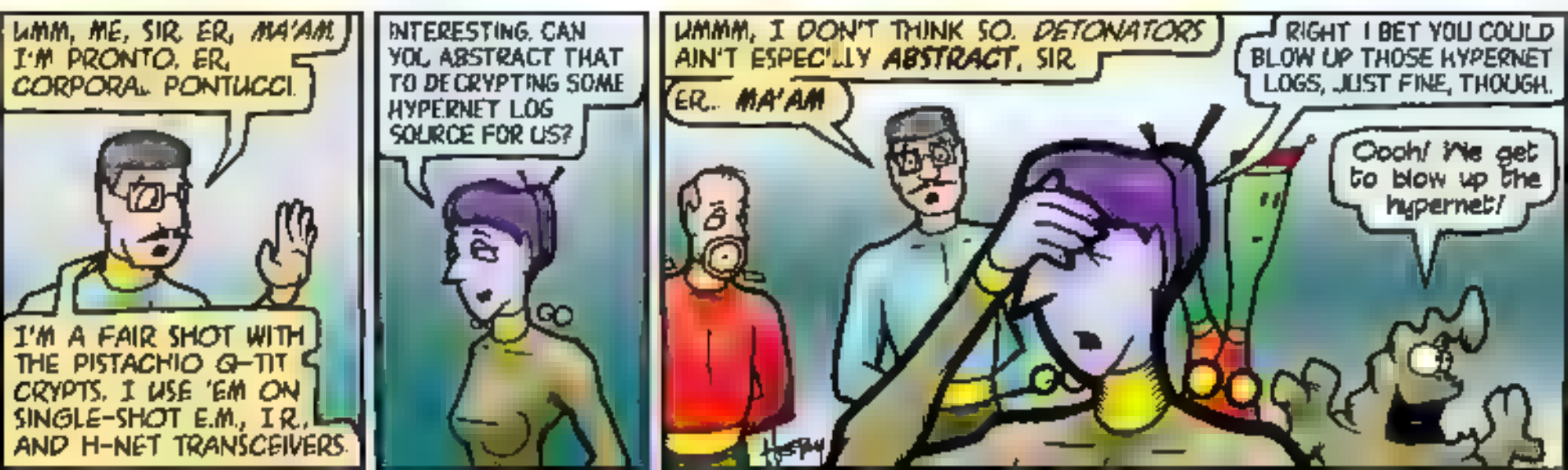

THEY COME IN ALL SHAPES AND SIZES. WITH ENOUGH INTER-SPECIATED DIVERSITY TO MAKE A RAINFOREST BLUSH.
SCRATCH THE SURFACE HOWEVER, AND YOU'LL SEE THEY ARE ALL A LOT ALIKE.

I'LL BE BRIEF. WE SEEM TO BE SHORT ON COMMUNICATIONS SPECIALISTS.


ENSIGN SH'VUU IN THE ARMOR PLATOON HAS A LITTLE BIT OF COMM AND CRYPTO TALENT, AND WARRANT OFFICER THURL HAS SOME BACKGROUND, BUT FOR THE MOST PART YOU PEOPLE ARE ONLY GOOD AT BLOWING STUFF UP

Did you hear that? She likes us!

SO... ANYONE ELSE HAVE CRYPTO EXPERTISE?

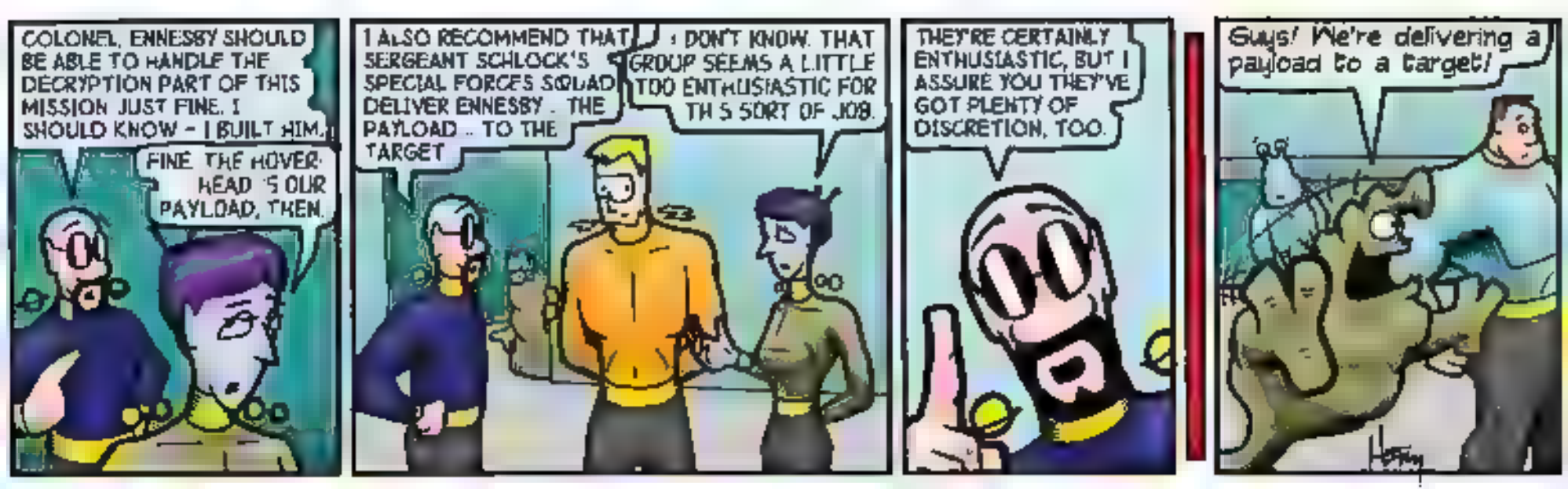

UMM, ME, SIR, ER, MA'AM. I'M PRONTO, ER, CORPORAL PONTUCCI.
I'M A FAIR SHOT WITH THE PISTACHIO Q-TIT CRYPTS. I USE 'EM ON SINGLE-SHOT E.M., I.R., AND H-NET TRANSCEIVERS.
INTERESTING. CAN YOU ABSTRACT THAT TO DECRYPTING SOME HYPERNET LOG SOURCE FOR US?
UMMM, I DON'T THINK SO. DETONATORS AIN'T ESPEC'LLY ABSTRACT, SIR.
ER... MA'AM
RIGHT. I BET YOU COULD BLOW UP THOSE HYPERNET LOGS, JUST FINE, THOUGH.
Oooh! We get to blow up the hypernet!

LOVELY. WE CAN PROBABLY GET OUR HANDS ON THE TINTH-PHILKRA LOGS, BUT WE DON'T HAVE THE EXPERTISE TO *USE* THEM.

THERE WILL BE ENORMOUS AMOUNTS OF DATA TO SIFT THROUGH. A RELEVANCE MATRIX TO BUILD, AND CONCLUSIONS TO DRAW.
Sounds like a job for an A.I., Colonel.

SHIP A.I.S LIKE YOURSELF ARE NOT WIRED RIGHT FOR SENSITIVE WORK LIKE THIS.
First of all, I'm smarter than any of your usual ship A.I.s

And secondly, if you think I'm not *sensitive* enough, perhaps you'd like me to try being *careless* while I'm piloting your sorry sack of tainted fluids across the galaxy.
COLONEL, PLEASE DON'T UPSET OUR RIDE.


COLONEL, ENNESBY SHOULD BE ABLE TO HANDLE THE DECRYPTION PART OF THIS MISSION JUST FINE. I SHOULD KNOW – I BUILT HIM.
FINE. THE HOVER-HEAD 'S OUR PAYLOAD, THEN.
I ALSO RECOMMEND THAT SERGEANT SCHLOCK'S SPECIAL FORCES SQUAD DELIVER ENNESBY . THE PAYLOAD .. TO THE TARGET
I DON'T KNOW. THAT GROUP SEEMS A LITTLE TOO ENTHUSIASTIC FOR TH S SORT OF JOB.
THEY'RE CERTAINLY ENTHUSIASTIC, BUT I ASSURE YOU THEY'VE GOT PLENTY OF DISCRETION, TOO.
Guys! We're delivering a payload to a target!

THE MERCENARY TRANSPORT SERIAL PEACEMAKER TERAPORTS FROM SOL SYSTEM TO THE PHILKRA SYSTEM

THERE IS A GALAXY WIDE WARREN AND TERAPORT SYSTEMS PREVENT THE INCONVENIENCE OF IN SYSTEM ARRIVAL

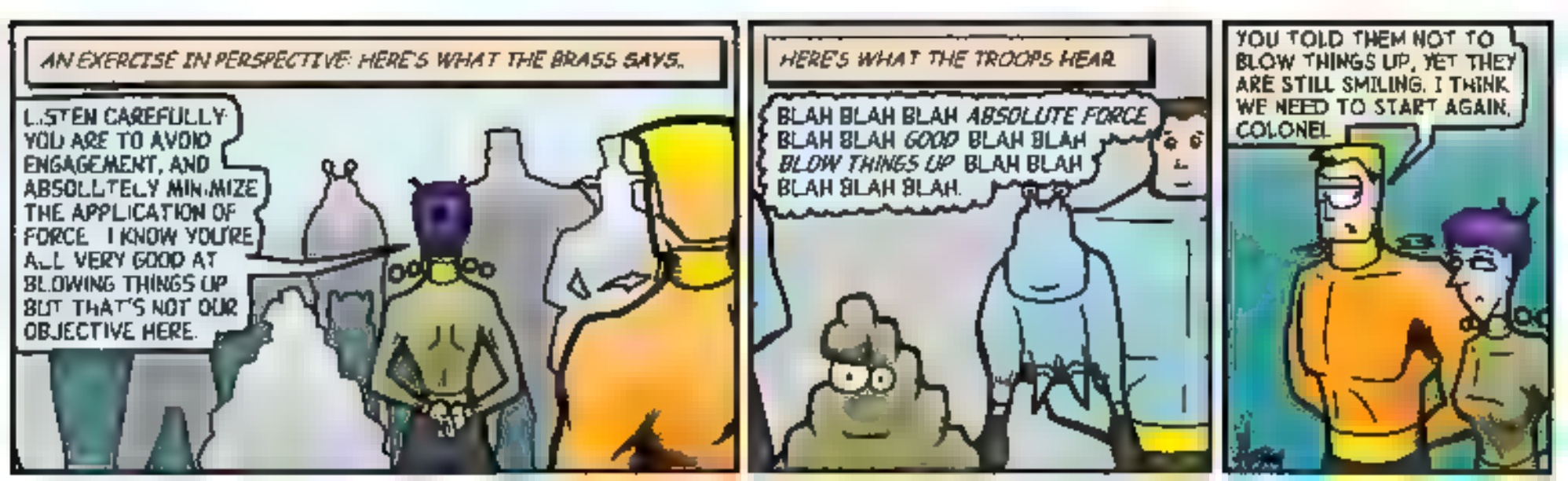
THIS MEANS DAYS OF SUB LIGHT VOYAGE IN FROM THE PHILKRA KUIPER BELT

TIME LIKE THIS IS BEST SPENT TRAINING HUNTING WILDLIFE ON A DEADLY EDGE

WHEN I SAID YOU COULD HOLD THE POPCORN, I DID NOT MEAN IN THERE

Oh well. More for me, then

UNLESS OF COURSE THERE'S SOMETHING REALLY GOOD ON TV


AN EXERCISE IN PERSPECTIVE: HERE'S WHAT THE BRASS SAYS.
LISTEN CAREFULLY: YOU ARE TO AVOID ENGAGEMENT, AND ABSOLUTELY MINIMIZE THE APPLICATION OF FORCE. I KNOW YOU'RE ALL VERY GOOD AT BLOWING THINGS UP BUT THAT'S NOT OUR OBJECTIVE HERE.
HERE'S WHAT THE TROOPS HEAR
BLAH BLAH BLAH ABSOLUTE FORCE BLAH BLAH GOOD BLAH BLAH BLOW THINGS UP BLAH BLAH BLAH BLAH BLAH.
YOU TOLD THEM NOT TO BLOW THINGS UP, YET THEY ARE STILL SMILING. I THINK WE NEED TO START AGAIN, COLONEL.

LET ME REPHRASE THE COLONEL'S LITTLE PEP TALK FOR YOU.
THIS MISSION IS TO BE A QUICK 'SMASH AND GRAB,' NOTHING MORE GOT IT?

Got it Emphasis on the 'smash,' right?

EMPHASIS ON THE GRAB, SERGEANT
You didn't mention the THOOM or the PZORCH.

BECAUSE THERE WON'T BE ANY
I'm bored already.
IMAGINE HOW THE LETTERER AND THE COLORIST FEEL

YOU'LL NEED THIS STUFF FOR THE MISSION, SERGEANT TACTICAL MAP AND ACCESS CODES...
...NON-LETHAL GOOBER ROUNDS FOR YOUR MULTI-CANNONS.
AND LAST BUT NOT LEAST, YOUR PAYLOAD; ENNESBY HE'LL BE DOING THE HEAVY LIFTING ON THE DATA.
I'll carry me myself, thanks

FIVE HUNDRED YEARS BEFORE HUMANS BURST ONTO THE GALACTIC SCENE THE ENIRETHS UNDERTOOK THEIR SECOND MOST AMBITIOUS ENGINEERING PROJECT AND MOVED THREE PLANETS INTO A SINGLE ROSETTE ORBIT

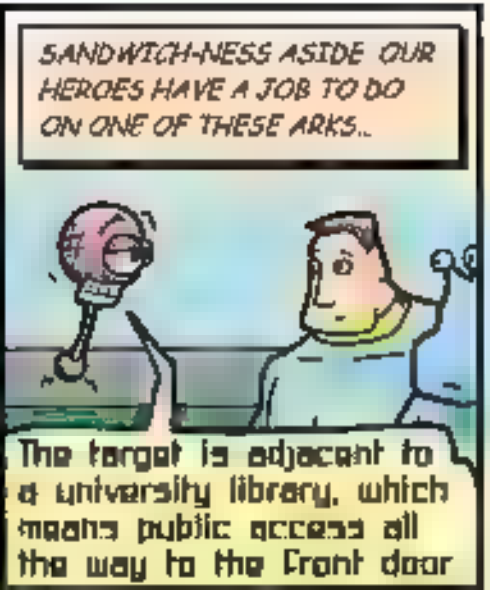
THE TINTH-PHILKRA ROSETTE COMPRISED OF ONE NATURAL WORLD AND TWO HABITIFORMED WORLDS, EVENTUALLY TRIPLED THE SIZE OF THE ENIRETH BIOSPHERE BUT NOT BEFORE CREATING A SMALL TIDE PROBLEM.

THE PHRASE "SMALL TIDE PROBLEM" IS AN ENIRETH EPITHET THE ECOLOGICAL DISASTER ON THEIR NATURAL HOMEWORLD LED TO THEIR MOST AMBITIOUS ENGINEERING PROJECT... EVACUATION.

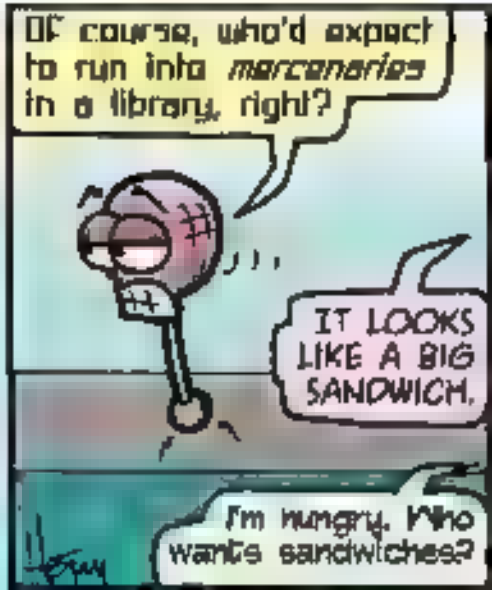
Schlock Mercenary

THE FIRST HUMAN TOURIST IN THE TINTH-PHILKRA SYSTEM TOOK ONE LOOK AT THE MAGNIFICENT CLUSTER OF ARKS AND SAID "OOH! IS IT A COMMERCIAL FOR SUBWAY?"

A THOUSAND YEARS LATER THERE ARE HUMANS LIVING THROUGHOUT THE 'SANDWICHES, AND THEY ARE UNIFORMLY-BUT-(MOSTLY)-QUIETLY RESENTED BY THE NATIVES

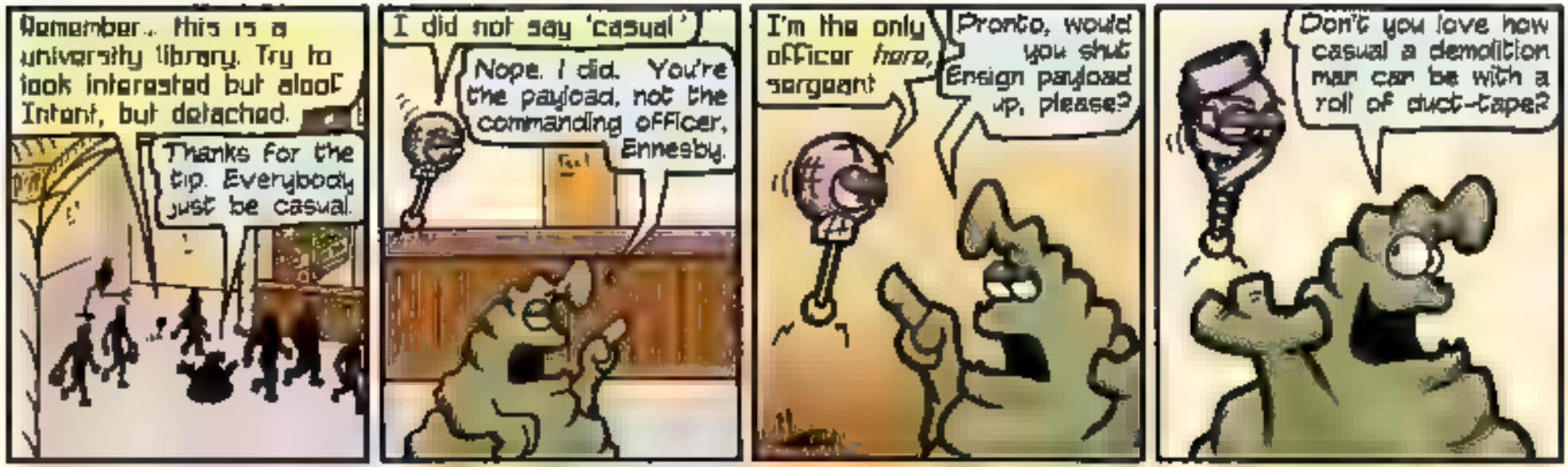

SANDWICH-NESS ASIDE OUR HEROES HAVE A JOB TO DO ON ONE OF THESE ARKS..
The target is adjacent to a university library, which means public access all the way to the front door

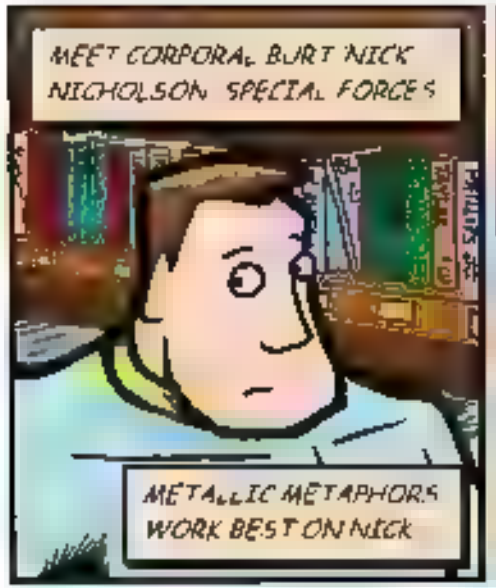
U.N.S. military intelligence assures us that security is negligible. The most dangerous thing we'll face is frat boys.
It's *really* unlikely we'll run into them in a *library*, if you know what I mean.

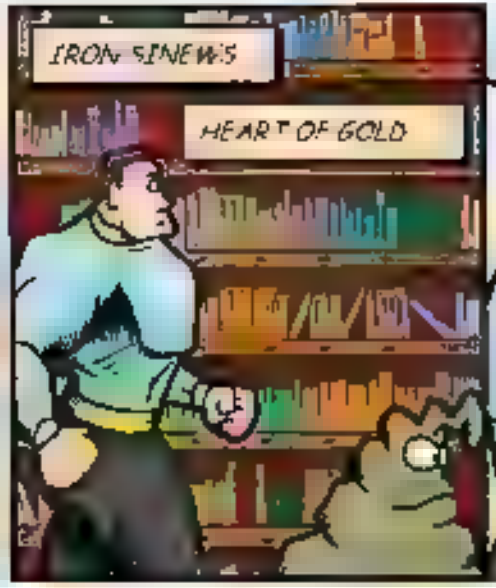

OF course, who'd expect to run into *mercenaries* in a library, right?
IT LOOKS LIKE A BIG SANDWICH.
I'm hungry. Who wants sandwiches?

THE ENIRETH ARE A SMOOTH-SKINNED SAPIENT RACE. EVOLVED FROM PHILKRA'S FRESH-WATER AMPHIBIOIDS
THEY ARE AN INTELLIGENT NOBLE AND PROUD PEOPLE WORTHY OF RESPECT
FRAT-BROTHERS! TONIGHT'S LEADERSHIP ACTIVITY TAKES US TO THE LIBRARY, WHERE WE SHALL TAUNT HUMAN FIRST-YEARS UNTIL THEY CRY
ON THE AVERAGE ANYWAY

SCHLOCK, I WANT YOU TO TAKE PRONTO WITH YOU ON THIS MISSION.
Why? I've already got Wick doing demo.
FIRST OF ALL, YOU DON'T HAVE *ANYBODY* DOING DEMO, BECAUSE NOTHING IS GOING TO GET BLOWN UP ON THIS MISSION!
SECONDLY PRONTO HAS A LITTLE EXPERTISE BUILDING HIS OWN CRYPTO HARDWARE, SO IT CAN ONLY HELP TO HAVE HIM ALONG.
Gimme two guys who both do demolitions, I say there's no *way* nothing is going to get blown up
And I'm fine with that


Remember... this is a university library. Try to look interested but aloof. Intent, but detached.
Thanks for the tip. Everybody just be casual.
I did not say 'casual'.
Nope. I did. You're the payload, not the commanding officer, Ennesby.
I'm the only officer *here*, sergeant.
Pronto, would you shut Ensign payload up, please?
Don't you love how casual a demolition man can be with a roll of duct-tape?

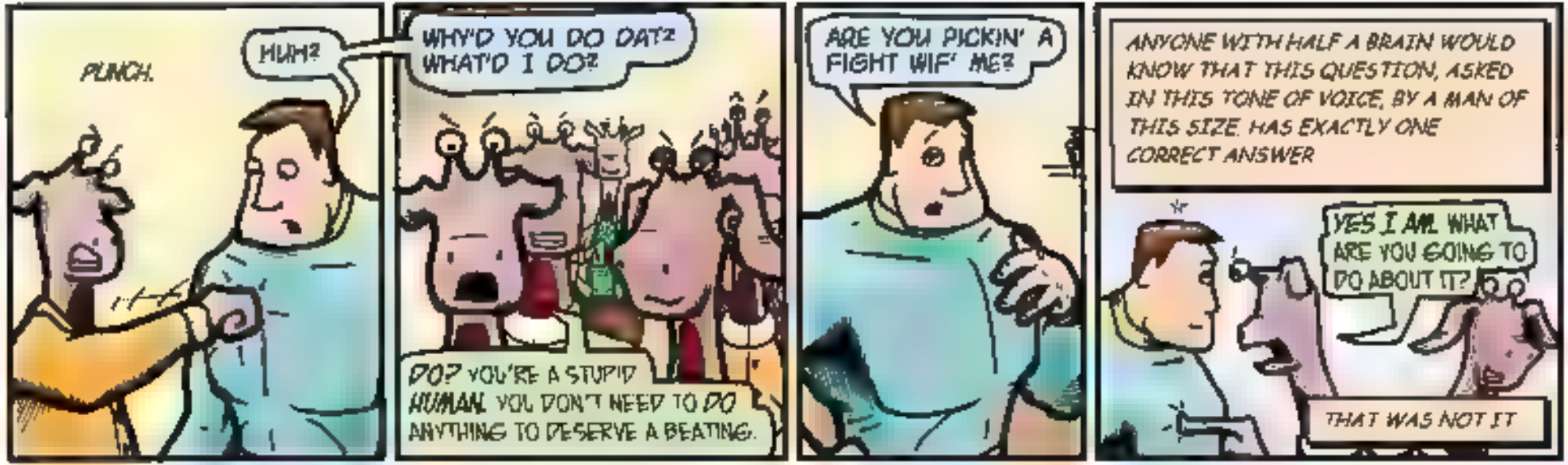

MEET CORPORAL BURT NICK NICHOLSON SPECIAL FORCES
METALLIC METAPHORS WORK BEST ON NICK

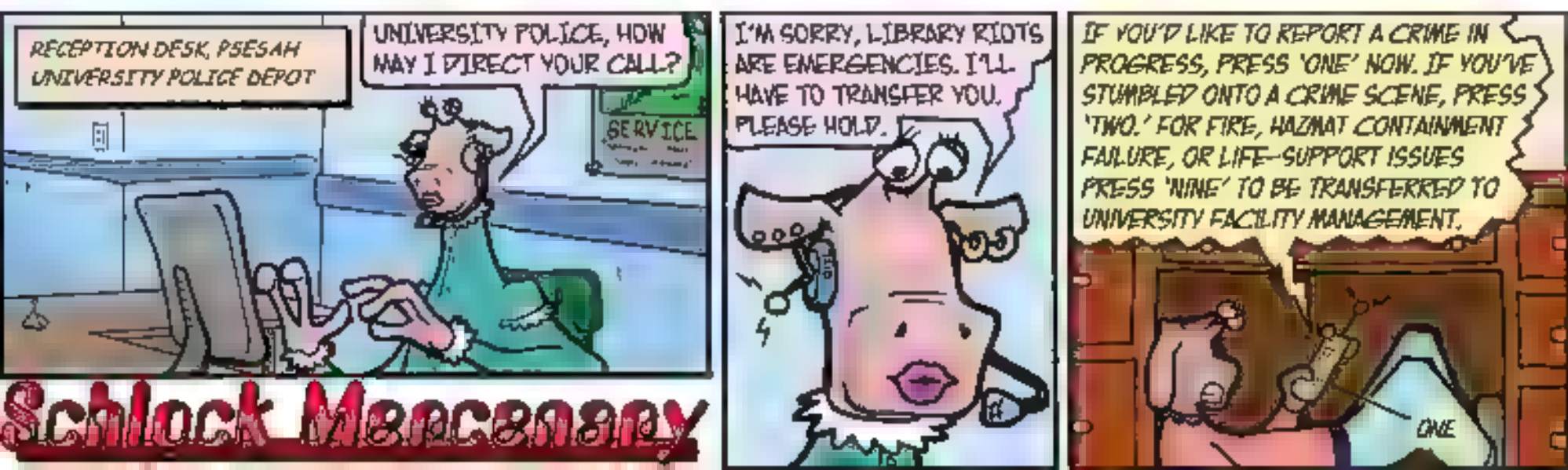

IRON SINEWS
HEART OF GOLD

DERE'S LOTSA WORDS ON DESE SHELFS. ARE DEY IMPORTANT?
MIND LIKE A STEEL ANVIL
Just books, Nick. Stay Focused.

OOH! PICTURES!
Focus, Nick
ATTENTION SPAN OF LAWRENCIUM 258

AWWW, DOES THE POOR HUMAN WANT ME TO READ THE PICTURE-BOOK TO HIM?
YEAH, DAT'D BE GREAT! THANKS! YOU WANNA GO OVER TO DEM COUCHES?
THIS ISN'T RIGHT. WHAT DO WE DO IF THE VICTIM WON'T PLAY ALONG?
I DON'T KNOW. PUNCH HIM?
WHAT DO YOU WANT TO BET THE VICTIM STARTS PLAYING ALONG?


PUNCH.
HUH?
WHY'D YOU DO DAT? WHAT'D I DO?
DO? YOU'RE A STUPID HUMAN. YOU DON'T NEED TO DO ANYTHING TO DESERVE A BEATING.
ARE YOU PICKIN' A FIGHT WIF' ME?
ANYONE WITH HALF A BRAIN WOULD KNOW THAT THIS QUESTION, ASKED IN THIS TONE OF VOICE, BY A MAN OF THIS SIZE, HAS EXACTLY ONE CORRECT ANSWER
YES I AM. WHAT ARE YOU GOING TO DO ABOUT IT?
THAT WAS NOT IT


RECEPTION DESK, PSESAH UNIVERSITY POLICE DEPOT
UNIVERSITY POLICE, HOW MAY I DIRECT YOUR CALL?
SERVICE
I'M SORRY, LIBRARY RIOTS ARE EMERGENCIES. I'LL HAVE TO TRANSFER YOU. PLEASE HOLD.
IF YOU'D LIKE TO REPORT A CRIME IN PROGRESS, PRESS 'ONE' NOW. IF YOU'VE STUMBLED ONTO A CRIME SCENE, PRESS 'TWO.' FOR FIRE, HAZMAT CONTAINMENT FAILURE, OR LIFE-SUPPORT ISSUES PRESS 'NINE' TO BE TRANSFERRED TO UNIVERSITY FACILITY MANAGEMENT.
ONE
Schlock Mercenary

YOU HAVE CHOSEN TO REPORT A CRIME IN PROGRESS. FOR THEFT, BURGLARY, VANDALISM, OR LOITERING PRESS 'ONE.' FOR ASSAULT, RECKLESS ENDANGERMENT, RIOTING, OR TELEMARKETING PRESS 'TWO.' FOR ATTEMPTED MURDER, MURDER, ATTEMPTED SUICIDE, SUICIDE, ATTEMPTED SPAM, OR ACTUAL SPAM, PRESS THREE.
TWO

UNIVERSITY POLICE, LEVEL TWO EMERGENCY CALL CENTER, HOW CAN I HELP YOU?

THE REPORT SAYS THAT SOME PUDDY-SPHAT-BILGER BOYS STARTED A FIGHT IN THE LIBRARY ROUSTING THE HUMANS AGAIN.
"SIGH" OH WELL. WE MIGHT AS WELL GET IN THERE AND HELP THE POOR, DEFENSELESS, ANNOYING HUMANS.

WUD

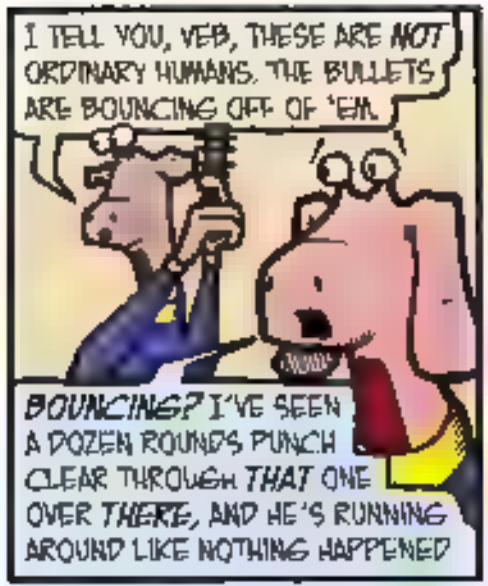
THEY DON'T LOOK DEFENSELESS TO ME
OH, GOOD! SHOOT TO KILL

You kids *really* shouldn't pick fights.
Of course, with us on official business, *we* really shouldn't have let you goad us into *fighting*.
But you just *had* to go and stand between us and our objective.
That made you an official obstacle, which means we get to have this fun on company time.
I'VE HAD FUN BEFORE, AND THIS IS NOT IT.
Sometimes you have fun, and sometimes the fun has you.

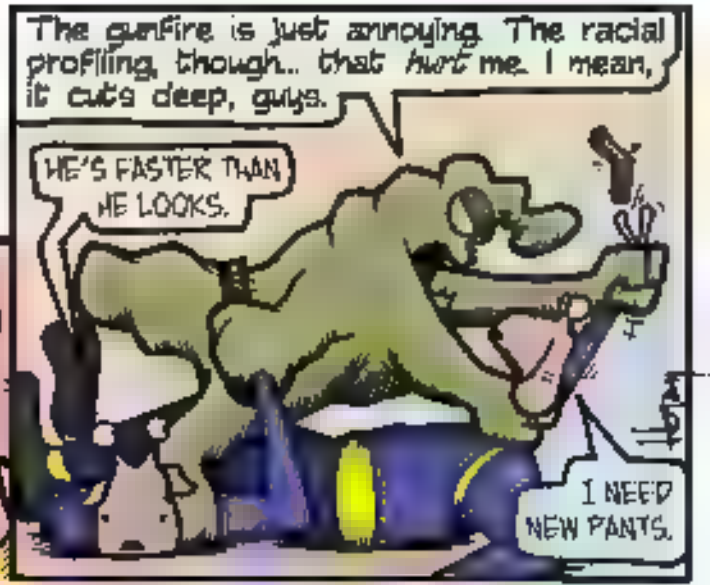
COPS WIT' GUNS! MAN! DAT MILITARY INTELL'GENCE IS LIKE ONE O' DEM PEOPLE WHO DON'T GET ENUFF AIR.

YOU KNOW. LIKE D'OSE GUYS 'JUMBO SHRIMP' AND 'REALITY TELEVISION'?

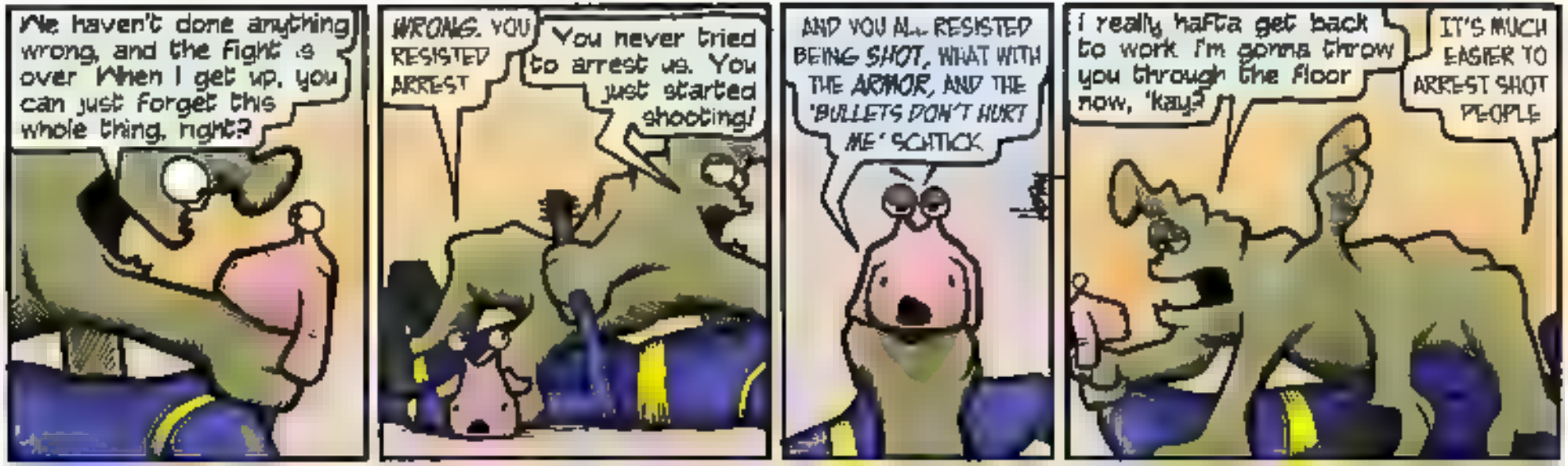
YOU MEAN AN OXYMORON?
YEAH. D'OSE GUYS.

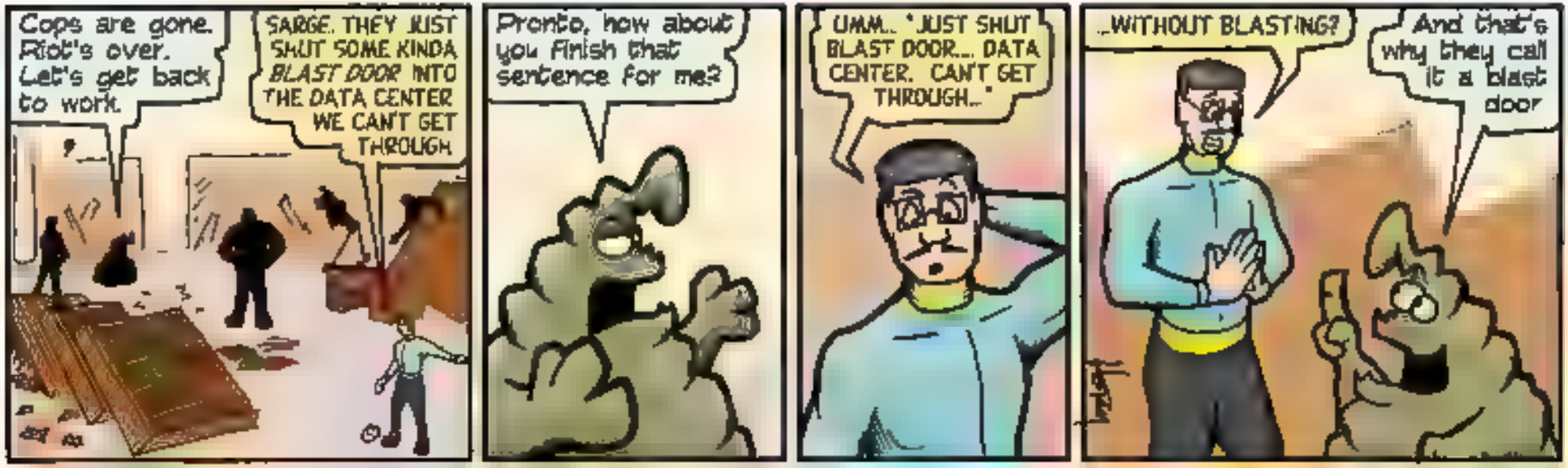

I TELL YOU, VEB, THESE ARE *NOT* ORDINARY HUMANS. THE BULLETS ARE BOUNCING OFF OF 'EM.
BOUNCING? I'VE SEEN A DOZEN ROUNDS PUNCH CLEAR THROUGH *THAT* ONE OVER *THERE*, AND HE'S RUNNING AROUND LIKE NOTHING HAPPENED

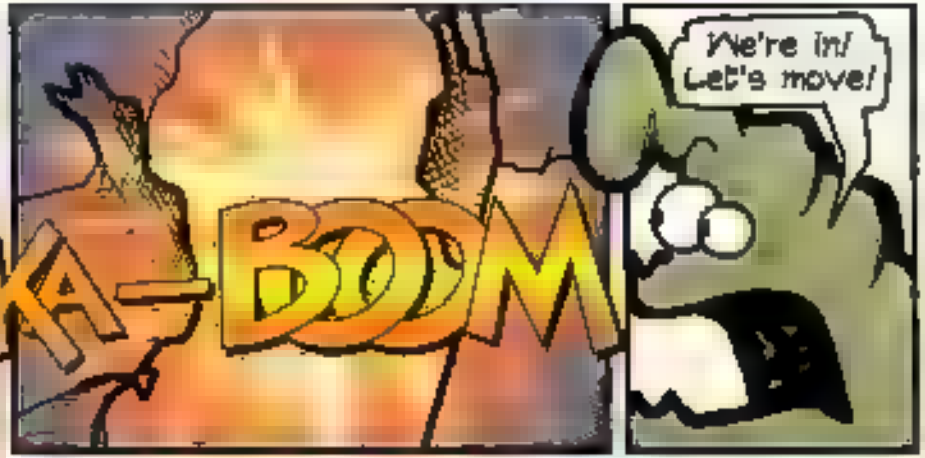
MAYBE THAT ONE'S NOT A HUMAN?
HEY, THEY ALL LOOK THE SAME TO ME.


The gunfire is just annoying. The racial profiling, though... that *hurt* me. I mean, it cuts deep, guys.
HE'S FASTER THAN HE LOOKS.
I NEED NEW PANTS.

Stop with the shooting, okay? Your bullets don't hurt me, and my friends are wearing low-profile armor
We don't want trouble. We just came in here to do a little reading, and we got jumped by these frat-boys.
IF YOU DIDN'T COME IN HERE LOOKING FOR TROUBLE, WHY ARE YOU GUYS WEARING COMBAT ARMOR IN A LIBRARY?
In case of, umm... dangerous... books?
I THINK YOU STUMPED HIM, VEB


We haven't done anything wrong, and the fight is over. When I get up, you can just forget this whole thing, right?
WRONG. YOU RESISTED ARREST
You never tried to arrest us. You just started shooting!
AND YOU ALL RESISTED BEING SHOT, WHAT WITH THE ARMOR, AND THE 'BULLETS DON'T HURT ME' SCHTICK
I really hafta get back to work. I'm gonna throw you through the floor now, 'kay?
IT'S MUCH EASIER TO ARREST SHOT PEOPLE


Cops are gone. Riot's over. Let's get back to work.
SARGE. THEY JUST SHUT SOME KINDA *BLAST DOOR* INTO THE DATA CENTER WE CAN'T GET THROUGH
Pronto, how about you finish that sentence for me?
UMM... "JUST SHUT BLAST DOOR... DATA CENTER. CAN'T GET THROUGH..."
...WITHOUT BLASTING?
And that's why they call it a blast door



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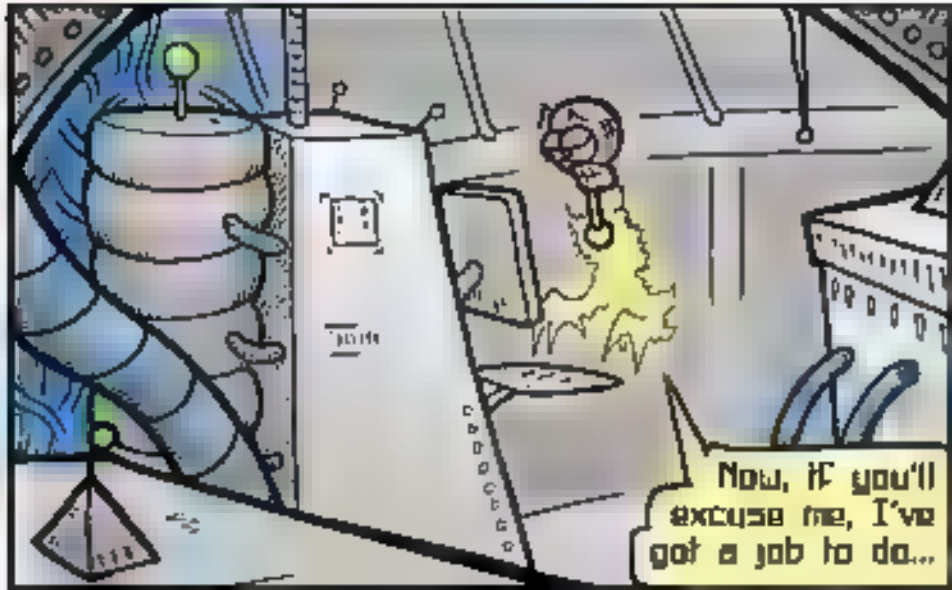
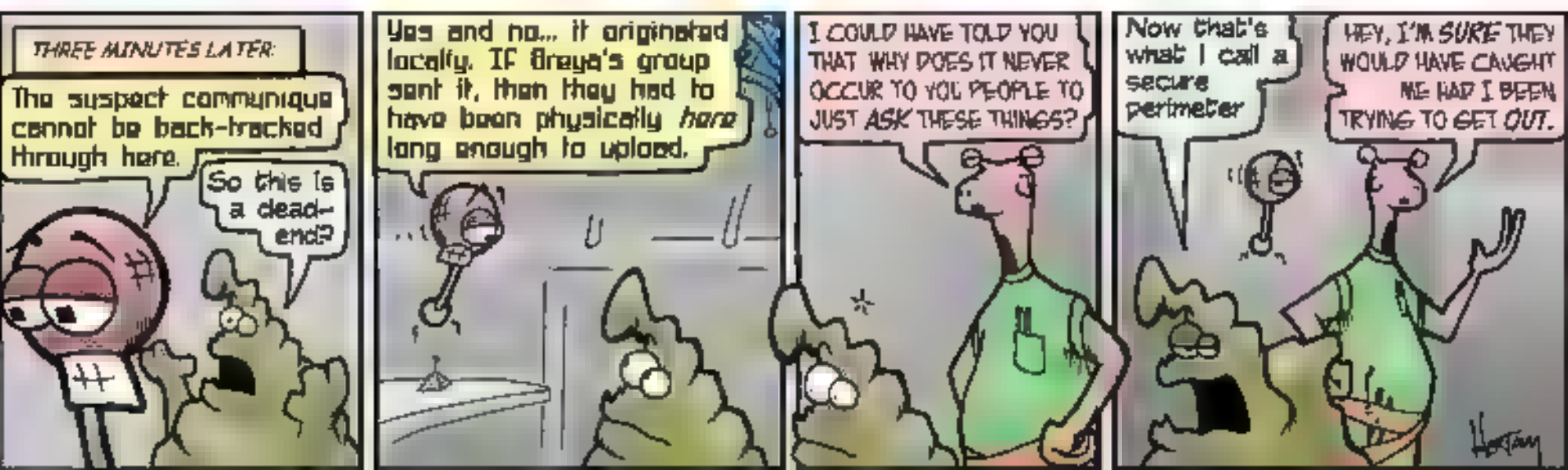
RRRRRIP

YOU'RE LUCKY YOU DON'T HAVE LIPS, ENNESBY

No, *you* are.


Now, if you'll excuse me, I've got a job to do...


THREE MINUTES LATER:
The suspect communique cannot be back-tracked through here.
So this is a dead-end?
Yes and no... it originated locally. If Freya's group sent it, then they had to have been physically *here* long enough to upload.
I COULD HAVE TOLD YOU THAT WHY DOES IT NEVER OCCUR TO YOU PEOPLE TO JUST ASK THESE THINGS?
Now that's what I call a secure perimeter
HEY, I'M *SURE* THEY WOULD HAVE CAUGHT ME HAD I BEEN TRYING TO GET *OUT*.

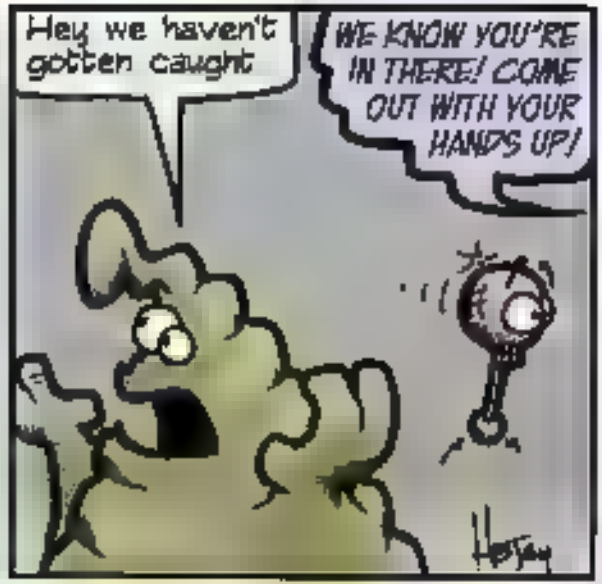
YOU WANT TO KNOW ABOUT THESE 'TINTH-PHILKRA' DIALOGS, I SUPPOSE
SOME MILITARY TYPES SHOT THEIR WAY IN HERE, UPLOADED A BUNCH OF DATA AND SOME INSTRUCTIONS AND THE TINTH-PHILKRA HYPERNET NODE WAS THEIR ZOMBIE FOR THE NEXT 22 MINUTES.
EVER SINCE THEN WE'VE HAD HACKERS TRYING TO TRACE THE TRANSMISSIONS THROUGH US TO ANOTHER SOURCE. NOBODY THINKS TO JUST ASK US WHERE THEY CAME FROM.
And if we had just asked, what would you have told us?
THAT THE DATA WAS NONE OF YOUR BUSINESS, BUT THAT WE DO HAVE A VERY PROGRESSIVE PORTFOLIO OF BRIBERY PACKAGES YOU CAN PURCHASE
Now. That is progressive.

This group that came through here before... were they human military, like us?
Well, not like me, obviously. Like my squad here
Oh, uh, except for those two.
BETWEEN THE TWO OF THEM THEY'VE GOT THE RIGHT NUMBER OF ARMS AND LEGS

YES, THE TEAM THAT UPLOADED THOSE DIALOGS WAS AT LEAST PARTLY HUMAN.

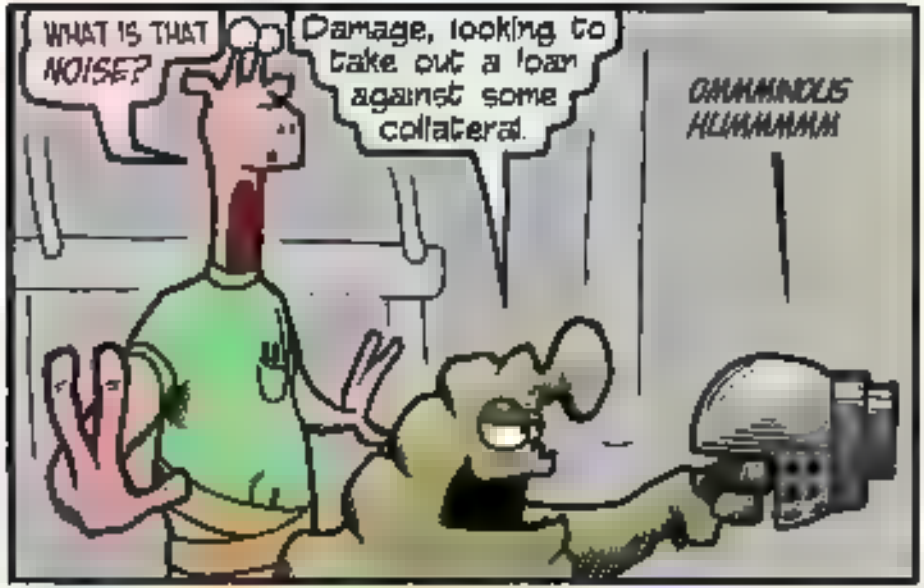
THEY WERE ALSO MILITARY
THEY WERE NOT LIKE YOU, HOWEVER

THEY MANAGED TO GET IN AND OUT WITHOUT BLOWING ANYTHING UP, OR GETTING CAUGHT

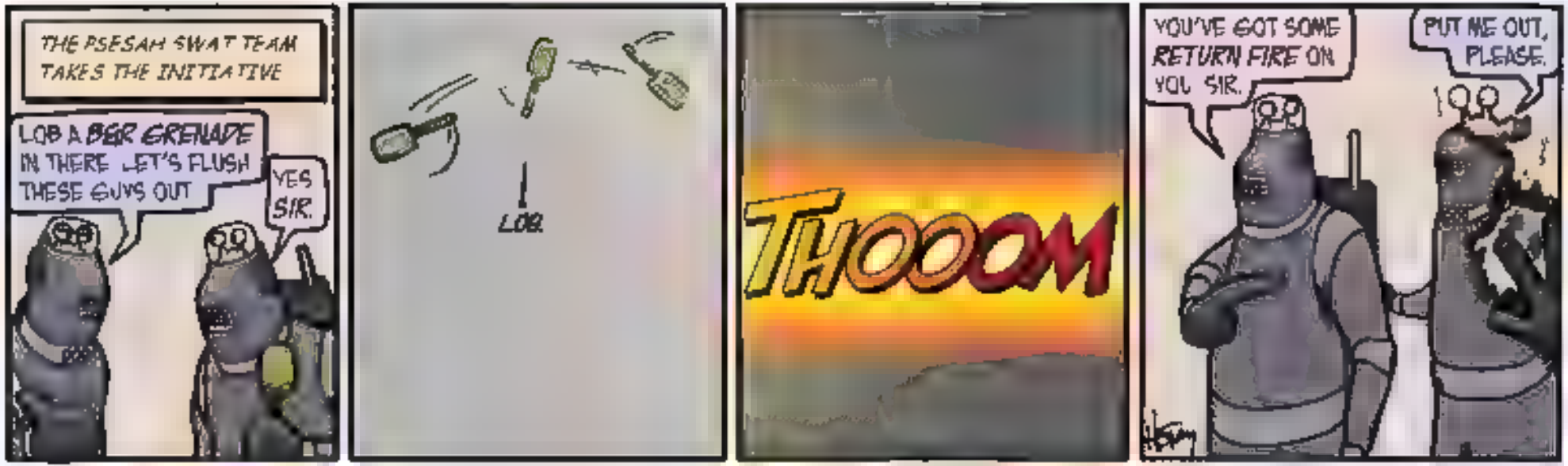

Hey we haven't gotten caught
WE KNOW YOU'RE IN THERE! COME OUT WITH YOUR HANDS UP!

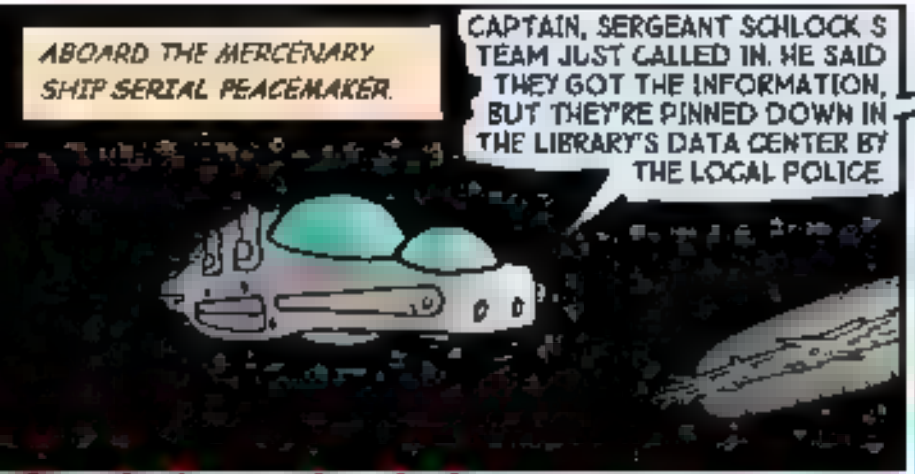
Uh-oh. That's our cue to leave.
I BELIEVE THE SWAT COMMANDOS OUT THERE HAVE OTHER IDEAS.

Nah, they're just police. They can't stomach a little collateral damage.


WHAT IS THAT NOISE?
Damage, looking to take out a loan against some collateral.
OMMMMOUS HUMMMMM

YOU'RE GOING TO USE A PLASMA CANNON TO SHOOT YOUR WAY OUT THROUGH A LIBRARY? THIS IS AN OUTRAGE! I WILL NOT STAND IDLY BY FOR THIS!
OMMMMNOUS HUMMMMM
Good point. Pronto, would you mind gift-wrapping our friend here in a nice, festive shade of sit-down-and-shut-up?
WHEN THE PARAMEDICS OFFER TO UNWRAP YOU, MAKE SURE YOU REMEMBER HOW TO SAY 'I WOULD LIKE SOME ANESTHETIC' IN SIGN LANGUAGE.


THE PSESAH SWAT TEAM TAKES THE INITIATIVE
LOB A BEER GRENADE IN THERE. LET'S FLUSH THESE GUYS OUT
YES SIR.
LOB.
THOOOM
YOU'VE GOT SOME RETURN FIRE ON YOU, SIR.
PUT ME OUT, PLEASE.



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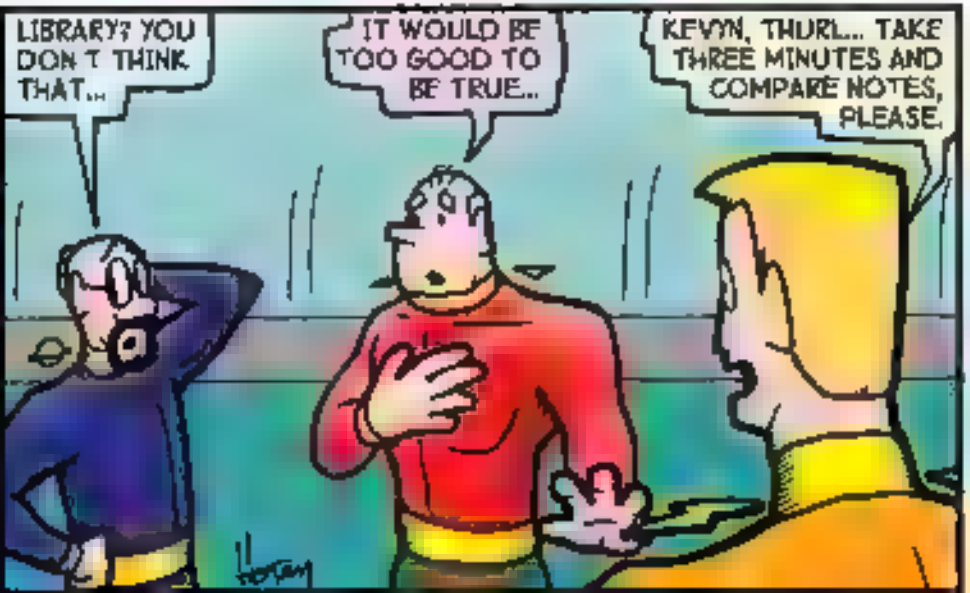
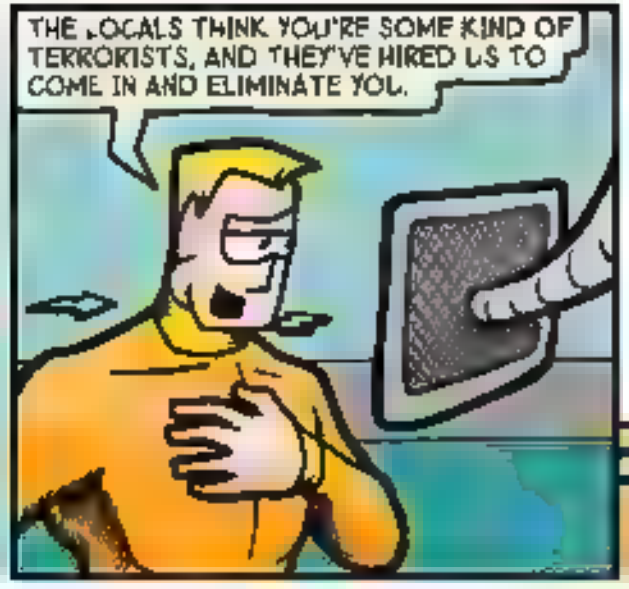
SPEAKING OF WHICH, CAPTAIN. I KNOW YOU DIDN'T REALLY *AUTHORIZE* THIS, BUT I JUST BID ON A SECURITY GIG HERE IN THE SYSTEM.
NOW MAY NOT BE THE BEST TIME TO BE TAKING THAT KIND OF INITIATIVE, THURL.
THEY SAID THEY'LL PAY TRIPLE, BUT THEY NEED US *IMMEDIATELY*
THEN AGAIN, THERE'S NO TIME LIKE THE PRESENT EH?
HERE'S THE DEAL... THE LOCAL POLICE HAVE CORNERED SOME TERRORISTS IN THE UNIVERSITY LIBRARY...
HANG ON. *KEVYN*, GET BACK
NOW... TELL THE COMMANDER ABOUT THIS GIG OF YOURS, WHERE WE HELP THE POLICE GET SOME TERRORISTS OUT OF A LIBRARY.


LIBRARY? YOU DON'T THINK THAT...
IT WOULD BE TOO GOOD TO BE TRUE...
KEVYN, THURL... TAKE THREE MINUTES AND COMPARE NOTES, PLEASE.

THE OPPORTUNITY TO GET PAID BY THE ENEMY FOR EXTRACTING YOUR OWN TROOPS DOESN'T JUST KNOCK ON YOUR DOOR EVERY DAY.

I SAY WE INVITE OPPORTUNITY INSIDE FOR A NICE CUP OF TEA, THEN HIT HER ON THE HEAD AND STEAL HER PURSE.
HERE'S HOPING SHE'S GOT EXPENSIVE TASTES AND A GREAT CREDIT RATING.

SERGEANT WE RE GOING TO GET YOU OUT OF THERE BUT WE NEED YOU TO PLAY ALONG


THE LOCALS THINK YOU'RE SOME KIND OF TERRORISTS, AND THEY'VE HIRED US TO COME IN AND ELIMINATE YOU.

WHAT? OF *COURSE* WE'RE NOT *REALLY* GOING TO KILL YOU. THAT S WHY WE NEED YOU TO PLAY ALONG.

OKAY, OKAY... I *PROMISE* NOT TO KILL YOU.

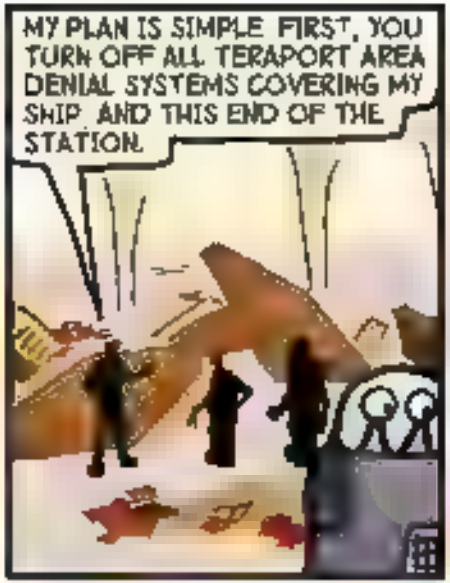
FOR THIS TO WORK YOU NEED TO HELP THAT SWAT TEAM BELIEVE THAT YOU ARE TERRORISTS

NO, NO, NO. IF YOU BURN THE LIBRARY DOWN AROUND THEM AND EAT THEIR ASHES THEN YOU'LL REALLY BE TERRORISTS

I WAS THINKING MORE ALONG THE LINES OF MAKING ABSURD DEMANDS.

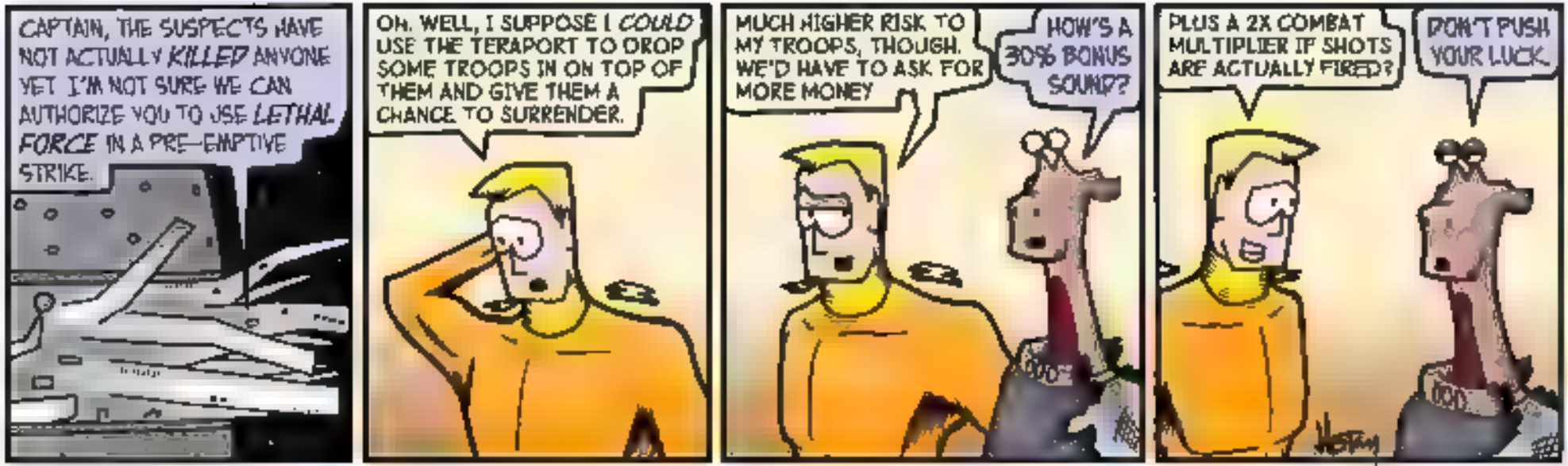
I'VE NEVER EVEN HEARD OF THE PRIME MINISTER OF OVALKWIK.
I'M JUST GLAD THEY'RE NOT ASKING FOR MILK, TOO.

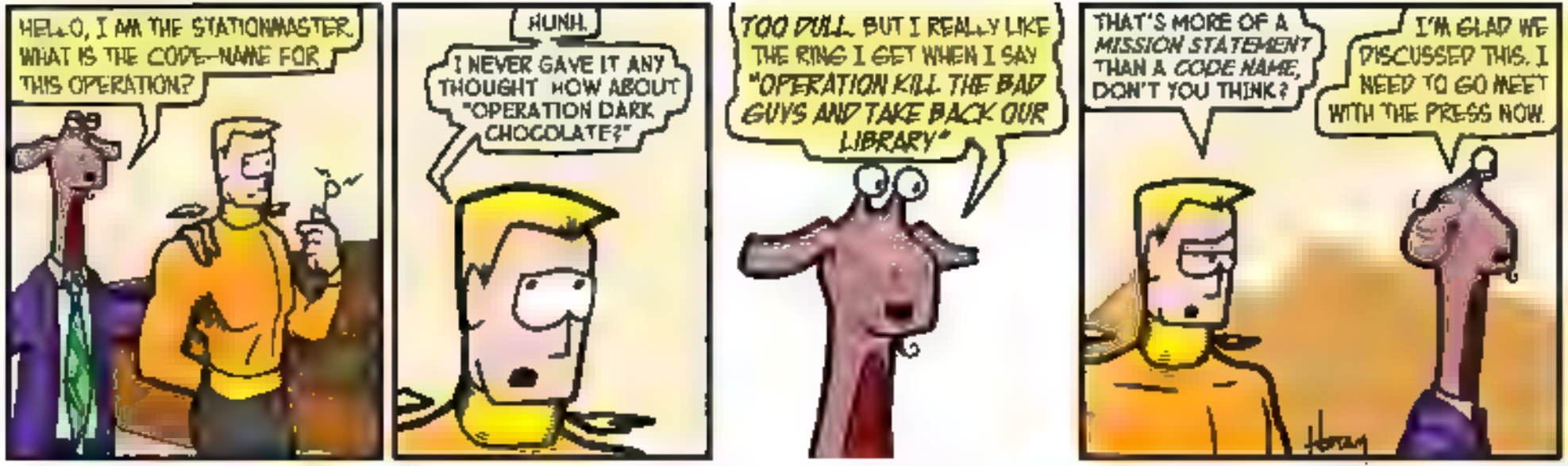
CAPTAIN TAGON, I'M GLAD TO SEE YOU. HOW DO YOU PROPOSE WE CLEAN UP THIS MESS?


MY PLAN IS SIMPLE. FIRST, YOU TURN OFF ALL TERAPORT AREA DENIAL SYSTEMS COVERING MY SHIP. AND THIS END OF THE STATION.

THEN I SIMPLY POP IN A COUPLE OF LOW-YIELD TERAPEDOES AND WE ALL GO HOME HAPPY

ALL OF US EXCEPT THE BAD GUYS, OF COURSE.
I THINK THE STATIONMASTER IS GOING TO WANT AN EXACT DEFINITION OF 'LOW YIELD'


CAPTAIN, THE SUSPECTS HAVE NOT ACTUALLY *KILLED* ANYONE YET. I'M NOT SURE WE CAN AUTHORIZE YOU TO USE *LETHAL FORCE* IN A PRE-EMPTIVE STRIKE.
OH. WELL, I SUPPOSE I *COULD* USE THE TERAPORT TO DROP SOME TROOPS IN ON TOP OF THEM AND GIVE THEM A CHANCE TO SURRENDER.
MUCH HIGHER RISK TO MY TROOPS, THOUGH. WE'D HAVE TO ASK FOR MORE MONEY
HOW'S A 30% BONUS SOUND?
PLUS A 2X COMBAT MULTIPLIER IF SHOTS ARE ACTUALLY FIRED?
DON'T PUSH YOUR LUCK.


HELLO, I AM THE STATIONMASTER. WHAT IS THE CODE-NAME FOR THIS OPERATION?
HUNH.
I NEVER GAVE IT ANY THOUGHT. HOW ABOUT "OPERATION DARK CHOCOLATE?"
TOO DULL. BUT I REALLY LIKE THE RING I GET WHEN I SAY "OPERATION KILL THE BAD GUYS AND TAKE BACK OUR LIBRARY"
THAT'S MORE OF A MISSION STATEMENT THAN A CODE NAME, DON'T YOU THINK?
I'M GLAD WE DISCUSSED THIS. I NEED TO GO MEET WITH THE PRESS NOW.

The captain says he's gonna do a teraport extraction for us. Be ready to move!

YA KNOW, PRONTO.. DA LAS' TIME SCHLOCK'S TEAM HAD A TER'PORT 'STRACTION, THE DEMO GUY GOT BLOW'D UP

S'OKAY, NICK. GOT INTO A FIST-FIGHT, BLEW UP A DOOR, AND GOT TO USE DUCT TAPE TWICE
IT'S A GOOD DAY TO DIE

OPERATION DARK CHOCOLATE (A.K.A. OPERATION KILL OUR ENEMIES AND TAKE BACK OUR LIBRARY) IS ABOUT TO BE LAUNCHED.

WE'RE AGREED, THEN. HALF DOWN. HALF ON COMPLETION.

Schlock Mercenary

AGREED. LET'S DO THIS THING.

...

SO,. I NEED THAT HALF DOWN, LIKE, NOW.

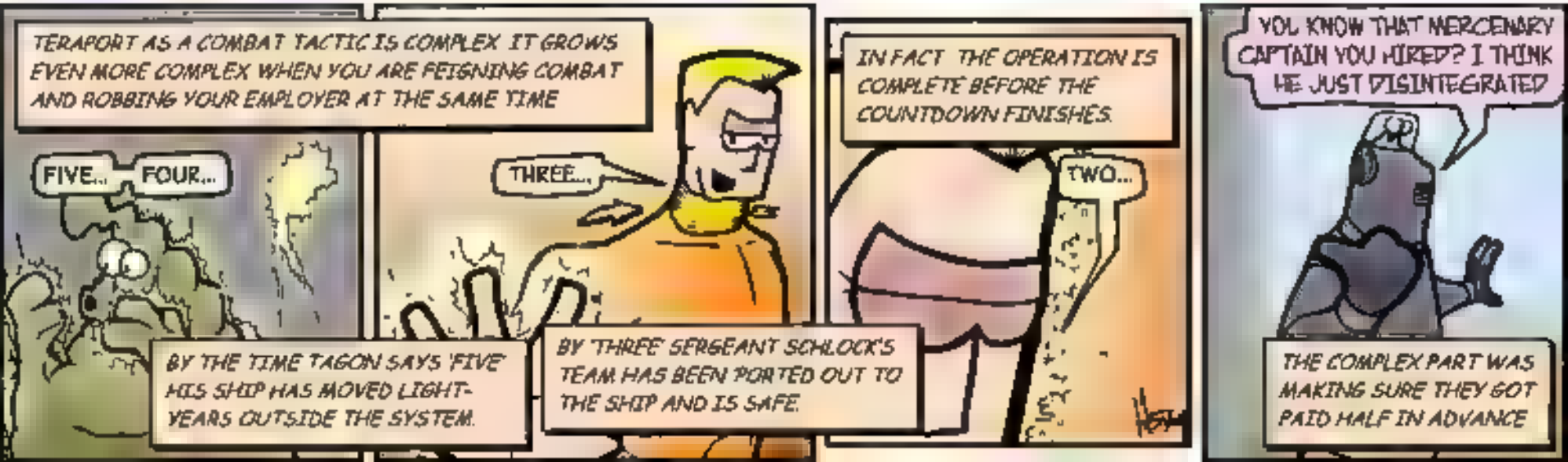
OH! SORRY

ONE HALF DOWN LATER.
PULL YOUR TROOPS BACK. THIS COULD GET MESSY

ANTI-TERAPORT SYSTEMS ARE OFFLINE!
WE ARE 'GO' IN TEN SECONDS... MARK!

THE TERAPORT IS A MODE OF TRAVEL WHOSE ENDPOINTS CAN BE ASSAULTED, BUT WHOSE PATH IS EFFECTIVELY IMPREGNABLE
NINE...
EIGHT...

ANYTHING YOU TERAPORT GETS RIPPED APART SHOVED THROUGH NANOSCOPIC WORMHOLES, AND REASSEMBLED AT THE DESTINATION.
SEVEN...
SIX...
THIS IS NOT SOMETHING YOU SHOULD THINK ABOUT IF YOU WANT TO ENJOY THE TRIP

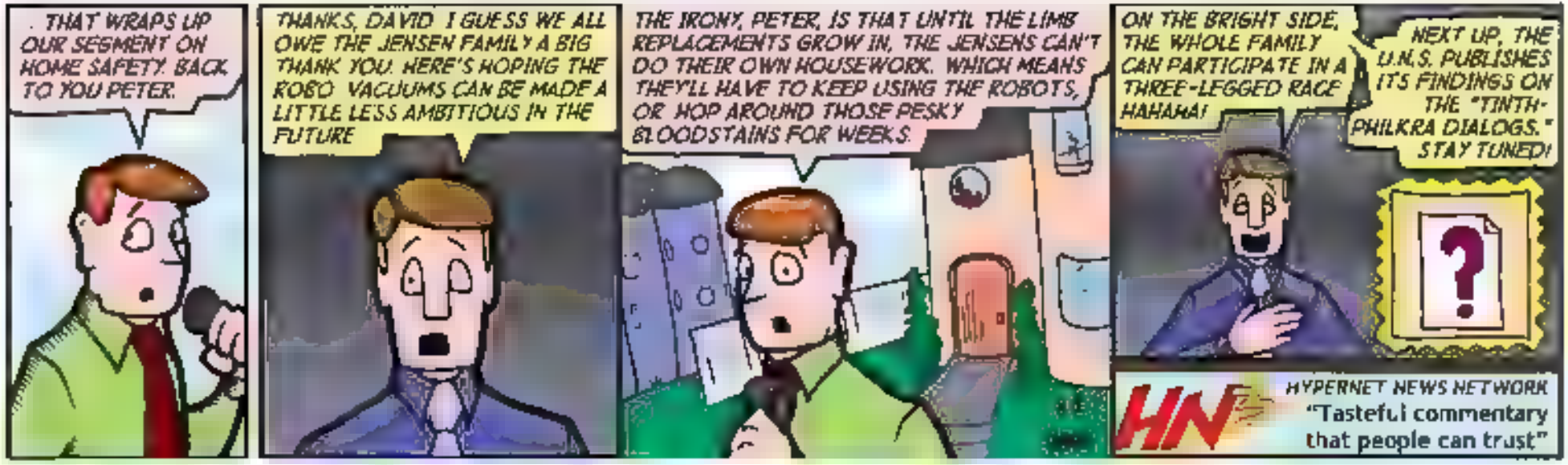

TERAPORT AS A COMBAT TACTIC IS COMPLEX. IT GROWS EVEN MORE COMPLEX WHEN YOU ARE FEIGNING COMBAT AND ROBBING YOUR EMPLOYER AT THE SAME TIME
FIVE...
FOUR...
BY THE TIME TAGON SAYS 'FIVE' HIS SHIP HAS MOVED LIGHT-YEARS OUTSIDE THE SYSTEM.
THREE...
BY 'THREE' SERGEANT SCHLOCK'S TEAM HAS BEEN PORTED OUT TO THE SHIP AND IS SAFE.
IN FACT THE OPERATION IS COMPLETE BEFORE THE COUNTDOWN FINISHES.
TWO...
YOU KNOW THAT MERCENARY CAPTAIN YOU HIRED? I THINK HE JUST DISINTEGRATED
THE COMPLEX PART WAS MAKING SURE THEY GOT PAID HALF IN ADVANCE

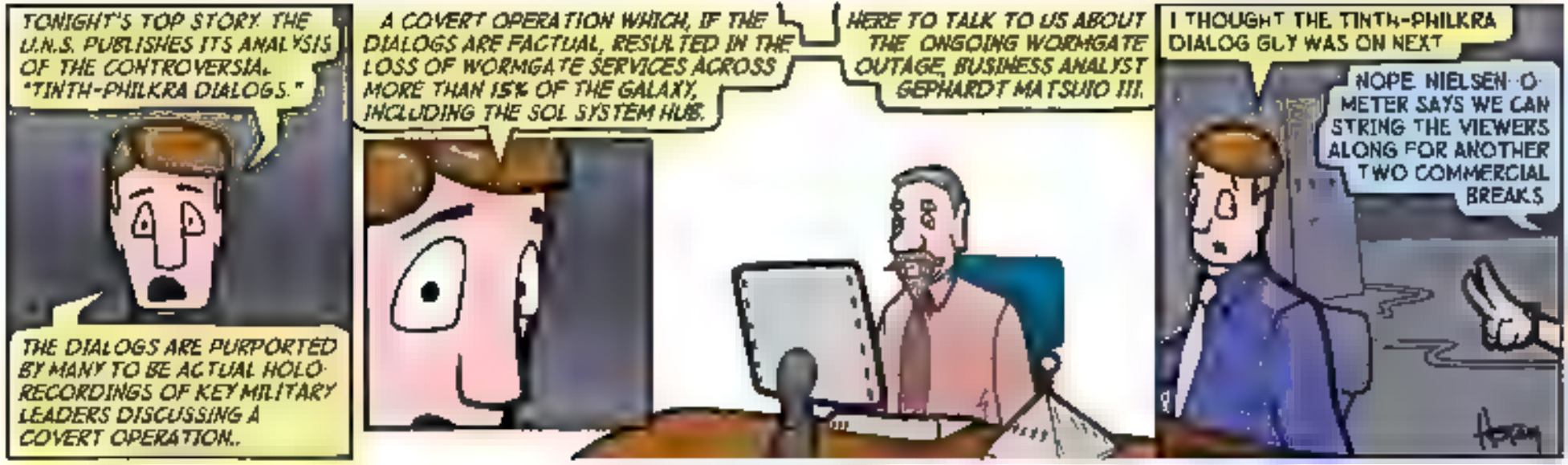
WELCOME TO THE TO THE HYPERNET NEWS NETWORK TONIGHT'S TOP NEWS. THE CONTROVERSIAL "TINTH-PHILKRA DIALOGS" COME UNDER SCRUTINY BY GOVERNMENT EXPERTS.

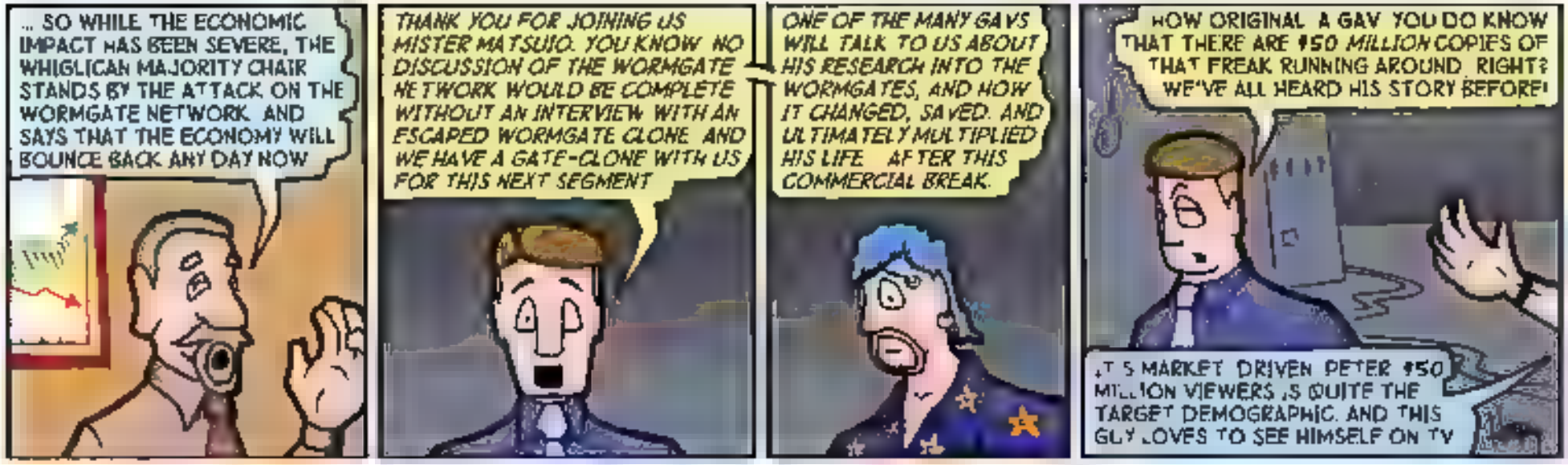
ALSO IN THIS EDITION, SPORTS HIGHLIGHTS, INCLUDING AN UPSET THAT HAS CROWDS RIOTING IN NECTARIS, AND A BIG WIN FOR THE ALL CHIMP GYMNASTICS TEAM FROM HOGAN CITY.

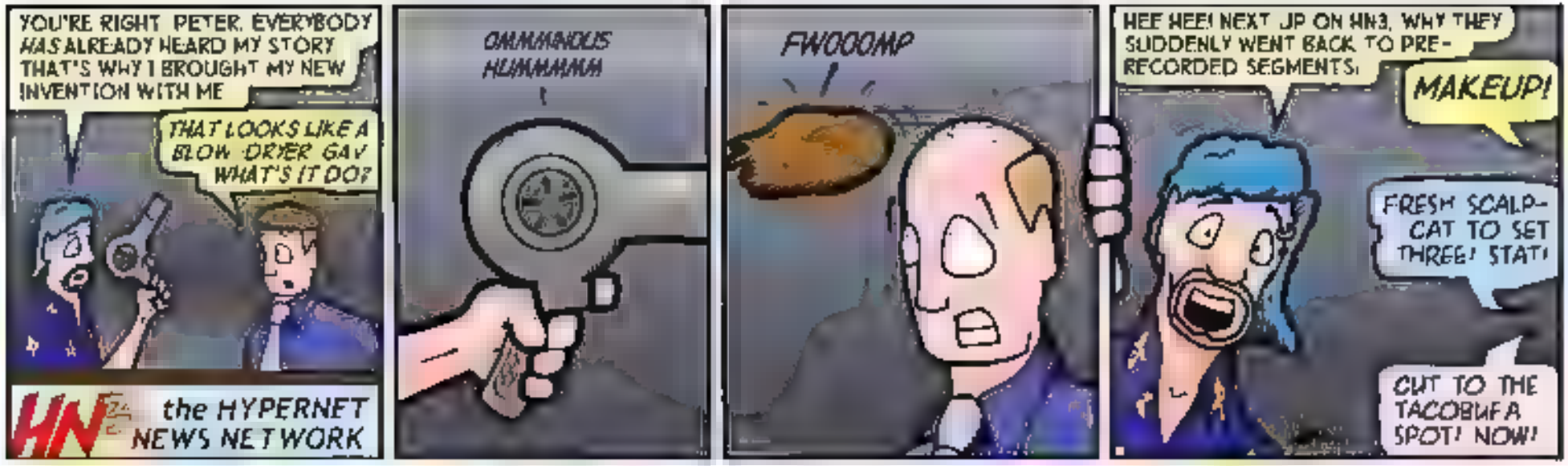
DURING THIS HOUR YOU CAN LOOK FORWARD TO CLOSE TO TWENTY MINUTES OF ENTERTAINING COMMERCIAL INTERMISSIONS, AS WELL AS A MUST-SEE SEGMENT ON HOME SAFETY – WHICH HOUSEHOLD APPLIANCES LEAD THE MARKET IN CAUSING ACCIDENTAL DEATH AND DISMEMBERMENT? SOMETIME IN THE NEXT HOUR YOU'LL FIND OUT WHETHER OR NOT WE'LL ACTUALLY TELL YOU
HN
the HYPERNET NEWS NETWORK

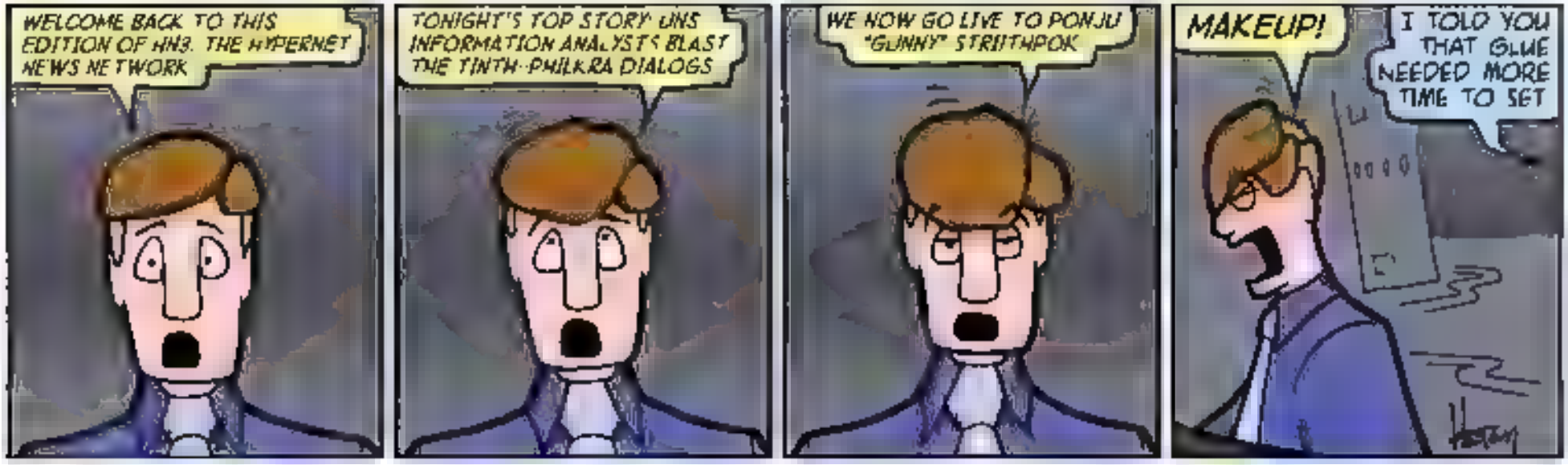
BUT FIRST A WORD FROM OUR SPONSORS.

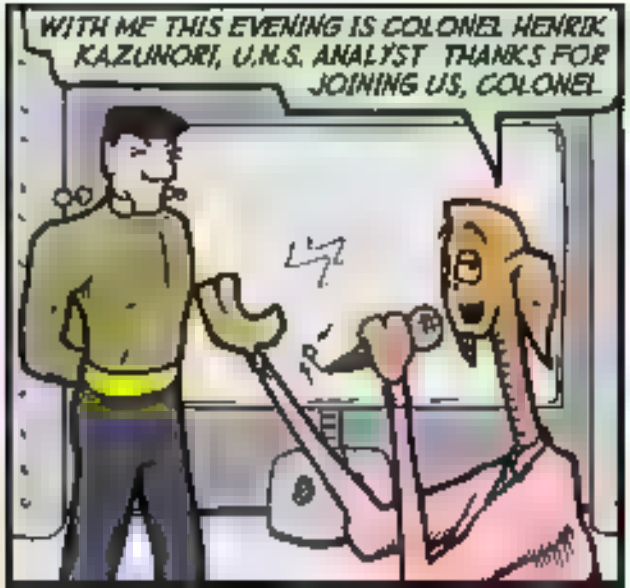

THAT WRAPS UP OUR SEGMENT ON HOME SAFETY. BACK TO YOU PETER.
THANKS, DAVID. I GUESS WE ALL OWE THE JENSEN FAMILY A BIG THANK YOU. HERE'S HOPING THE ROBO VACUUMS CAN BE MADE A LITTLE LESS AMBITIOUS IN THE FUTURE.
THE IRONY, PETER, IS THAT UNTIL THE LIMB REPLACEMENTS GROW IN, THE JENSENS CAN'T DO THEIR OWN HOUSEWORK. WHICH MEANS THEY'LL HAVE TO KEEP USING THE ROBOTS, OR HOP AROUND THOSE PESKY BLOODSTAINS FOR WEEKS.
ON THE BRIGHT SIDE, THE WHOLE FAMILY CAN PARTICIPATE IN A THREE-LEGGED RACE. HAHAHA!
NEXT UP, THE U.N.S. PUBLISHES ITS FINDINGS ON THE "TINTH-PHILKRA DIALOGS." STAY TUNED!
?
HN
HYPERNET NEWS NETWORK
"Tasteful commentary that people can trust"


TONIGHT'S TOP STORY. THE U.N.S. PUBLISHES ITS ANALYSIS OF THE CONTROVERSIAL "TINTH-PHILKRA DIALOGS."
THE DIALOGS ARE PURPORTED BY MANY TO BE ACTUAL HOLO-RECORDINGS OF KEY MILITARY LEADERS DISCUSSING A COVERT OPERATION..
A COVERT OPERATION WHICH, IF THE DIALOGS ARE FACTUAL, RESULTED IN THE LOSS OF WORMGATE SERVICES ACROSS MORE THAN 15% OF THE GALAXY, INCLUDING THE SOL SYSTEM HUB.
HERE TO TALK TO US ABOUT THE ONGOING WORMGATE OUTAGE, BUSINESS ANALYST GEPHARDT MATSUIO III.
I THOUGHT THE TINTH-PHILKRA DIALOG GUY WAS ON NEXT
NOPE. NIELSEN-O-METER SAYS WE CAN STRING THE VIEWERS ALONG FOR ANOTHER TWO COMMERCIAL BREAKS

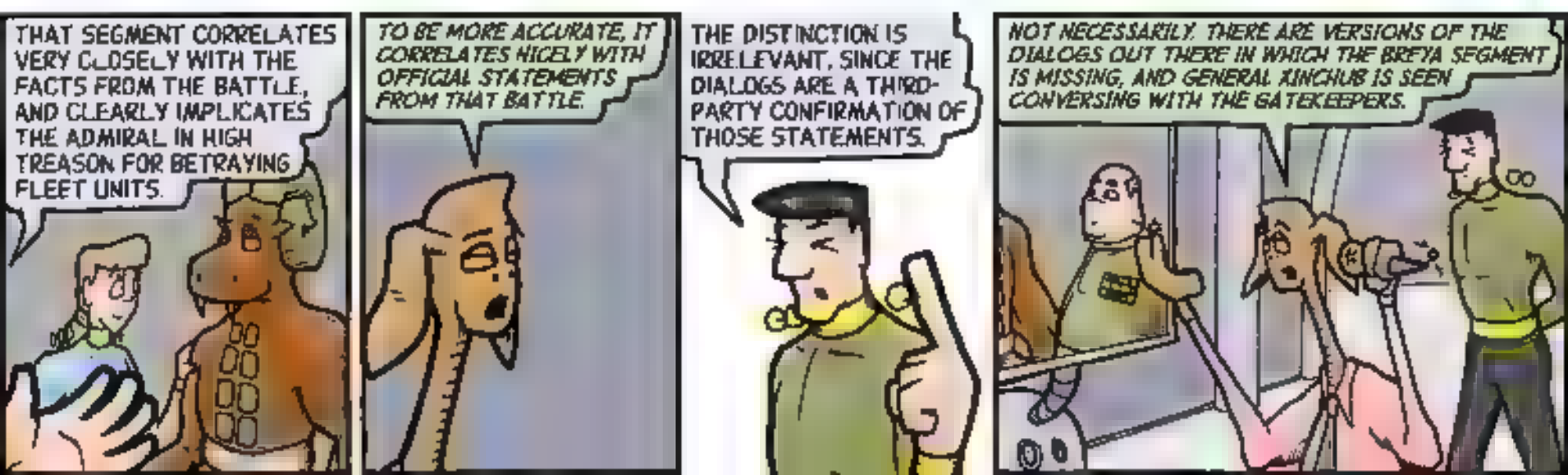

... SO WHILE THE ECONOMIC IMPACT HAS BEEN SEVERE, THE WHIGLICAN MAJORITY CHAIR STANDS BY THE ATTACK ON THE WORMGATE NETWORK AND SAYS THAT THE ECONOMY WILL BOUNCE BACK ANY DAY NOW
THANK YOU FOR JOINING US MISTER MATSUJO. YOU KNOW NO DISCUSSION OF THE WORMGATE NETWORK WOULD BE COMPLETE WITHOUT AN INTERVIEW WITH AN ESCAPED WORMGATE CLONE AND WE HAVE A GATE-CLONE WITH US FOR THIS NEXT SEGMENT
ONE OF THE MANY GAVS WILL TALK TO US ABOUT HIS RESEARCH INTO THE WORMGATES, AND HOW IT CHANGED, SAVED, AND ULTIMATELY MULTIPLIED HIS LIFE. AFTER THIS COMMERCIAL BREAK.
HOW ORIGINAL. A GAV. YOU DO KNOW THAT THERE ARE 150 MILLION COPIES OF THAT FREAK RUNNING AROUND, RIGHT? WE'VE ALL HEARD HIS STORY BEFORE!
IT'S MARKET DRIVEN PETER. 150 MILLION VIEWERS IS QUITE THE TARGET DEMOGRAPHIC. AND THIS GUY LOVES TO SEE HIMSELF ON TV

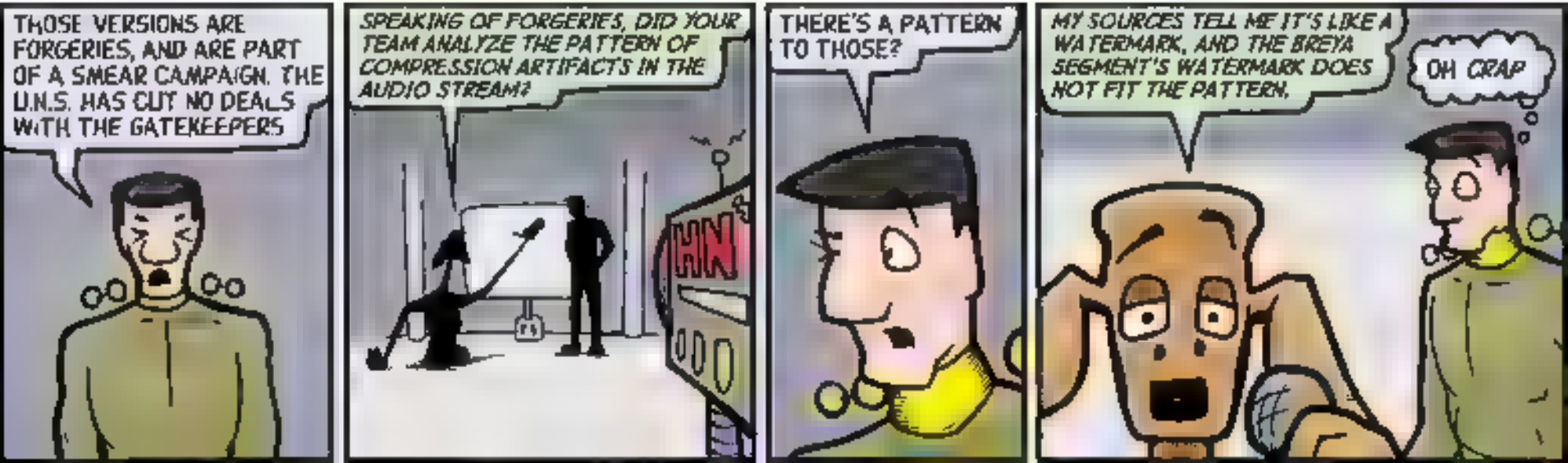

YOU'RE RIGHT PETER. EVERYBODY HAS ALREADY HEARD MY STORY THAT'S WHY I BROUGHT MY NEW INVENTION WITH ME
THAT LOOKS LIKE A BLOW DRYER GAV WHAT'S IT DO?
HN the HYPERNET NEWS NETWORK
OMMMMOUS HUMMMMM
FWOOOMP
HEE HEE! NEXT UP ON HN3, WHY THEY SUDDENLY WENT BACK TO PRE-RECORDED SEGMENTS.
MAKEUP!
FRESH SCALP-CAT TO SET THREE! STAT!
CUT TO THE TACOBUFA SPOT! NOW!


WELCOME BACK TO THIS EDITION OF HN3. THE HYPERNET NEWS NETWORK
TONIGHT'S TOP STORY: UNS INFORMATION ANALYSTS BLAST THE TINTH-PHILKRA DIALOGS
WE NOW GO LIVE TO PONJU "GUNNY" STRUTHPOK
MAKEUP!
I TOLD YOU THAT GLUE NEEDED MORE TIME TO SET



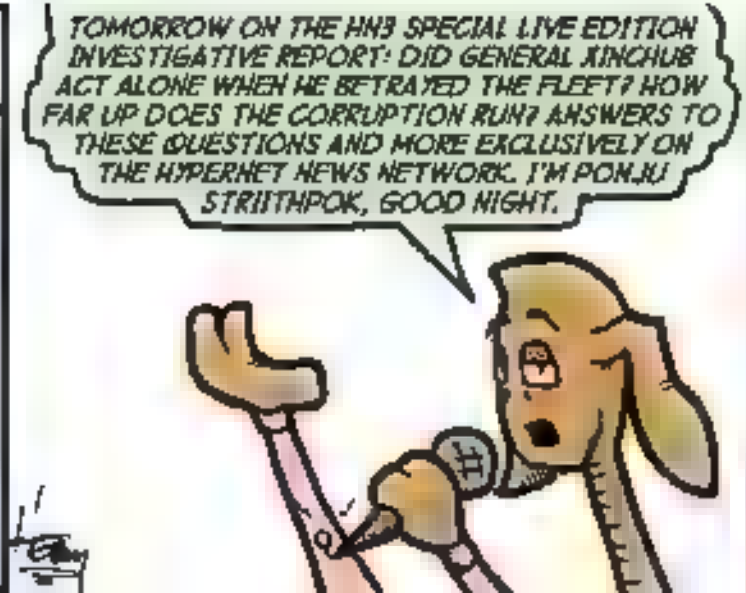
Schlock Mercenary


THAT SEGMENT CORRELATES VERY CLOSELY WITH THE FACTS FROM THE BATTLE, AND CLEARLY IMPLICATES THE ADMIRAL IN HIGH TREASON FOR BETRAYING FLEET UNITS.
TO BE MORE ACCURATE, IT CORRELATES NICELY WITH OFFICIAL STATEMENTS FROM THAT BATTLE.
THE DISTINCTION IS IRRELEVANT, SINCE THE DIALOGS ARE A THIRD-PARTY CONFIRMATION OF THOSE STATEMENTS.
NOT NECESSARILY. THERE ARE VERSIONS OF THE DIALOGS OUT THERE IN WHICH THE BREYA SEGMENT IS MISSING, AND GENERAL XINCHUB IS SEEN CONVERSING WITH THE GATEKEEPERS.


THOSE VERSIONS ARE FORGERIES, AND ARE PART OF A SMEAR CAMPAIGN. THE U.N.S. HAS CUT NO DEALS WITH THE GATEKEEPERS
SPEAKING OF FORGERIES, DID YOUR TEAM ANALYZE THE PATTERN OF COMPRESSION ARTIFACTS IN THE AUDIO STREAM?
HN
THERE'S A PATTERN TO THOSE?
MY SOURCES TELL ME IT'S LIKE A WATERMARK, AND THE BREYA SEGMENT'S WATERMARK DOES NOT FIT THE PATTERN.
OH CRAP

DO YOU WANT TO HEAR ABOUT HOW THE XINCHUB SEGMENT FITS?
UM... UH...

IF YOU'LL EXCUSE ME, I NEED TO GO AWAY RIGHT NOW


TOMORROW ON THE HN3 SPECIAL LIVE EDITION INVESTIGATIVE REPORT: DID GENERAL XINCHUB ACT ALONE WHEN HE BETRAYED THE FLEET? HOW FAR UP DOES THE CORRUPTION RUN? ANSWERS TO THESE QUESTIONS AND MORE EXCLUSIVELY ON THE HYPERNET NEWS NETWORK. I'M PONJU STRIITHPOK, GOOD NIGHT.

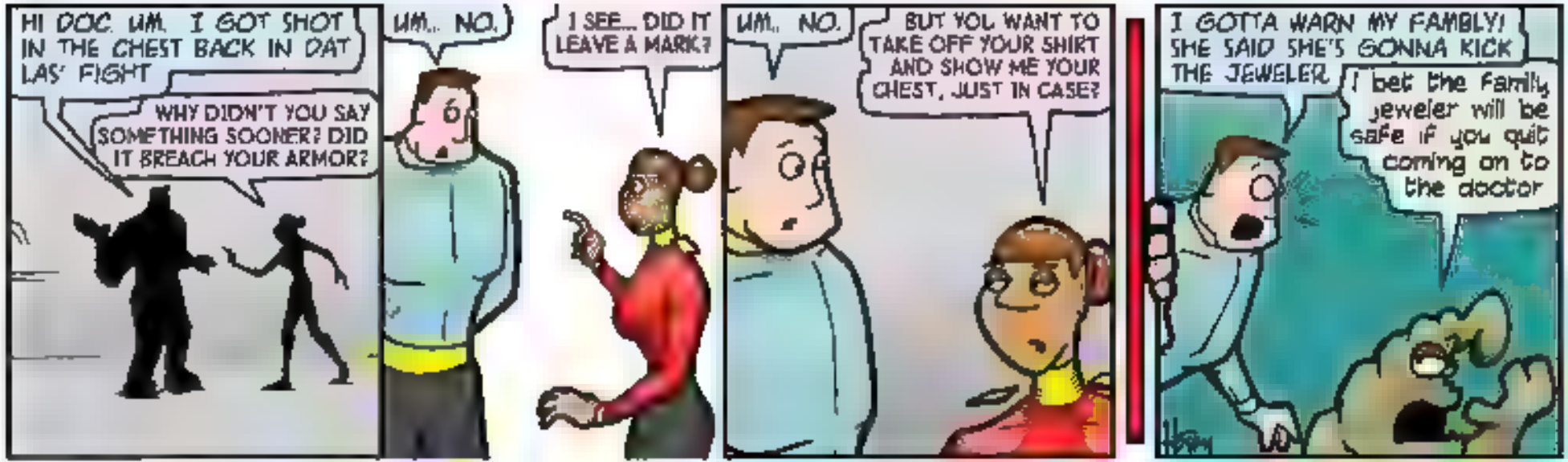
AND IN A VERY SPECIAL SEGMENT, SEE PONJU STRIITHPOK GET HIS SECOND PULITZER PRIZE.

HEY, DOC.
HI, NICK. WHAT'S ON YOUR MIND?

IT'S A FIGURE OF SPEECH, NICK.
UM...

I KNOW. LET'S START OVER. I'LL GO FIRST.
HI, NICK.

AS YOU MAY ALREADY KNOW, I'VE HIRED A COLORIST TO TAKE OVER FOR ME ON *SCHLOCK MERCENARY*.
QUITE SIMPLY, I DID IT BECAUSE I WAS HAVING A HARD TIME KEEPING UP.
HER WORK HAS BEEN FANTASTIC. TODAY I OFFER JEAN ELMORE HEROIC PROPS AND KUDOS AS PART OF WEBCARTOONIST'S APPRECIATION DAY.
YOU GO, GIRL!
I HEAR THAT SHE'S HAVING A HARD TIME KEEPING UP TOO.
AAAIE! Go away, Girl!


HI DOC. UM. I GOT SHOT IN THE CHEST BACK IN DAT LAS' FIGHT
WHY DIDN'T YOU SAY SOMETHING SOONER? DID IT BREACH YOUR ARMOR?
UM... NO.
I SEE... DID IT LEAVE A MARK?
UM... NO.
BUT YOU WANT TO TAKE OFF YOUR SHIRT AND SHOW ME YOUR CHEST, JUST IN CASE?
I GOTTA WARN MY FAMBLY! SHE SAID SHE'S GONNA KICK THE JEWELER
I bet the family jeweler will be safe if you quit coming on to the doctor

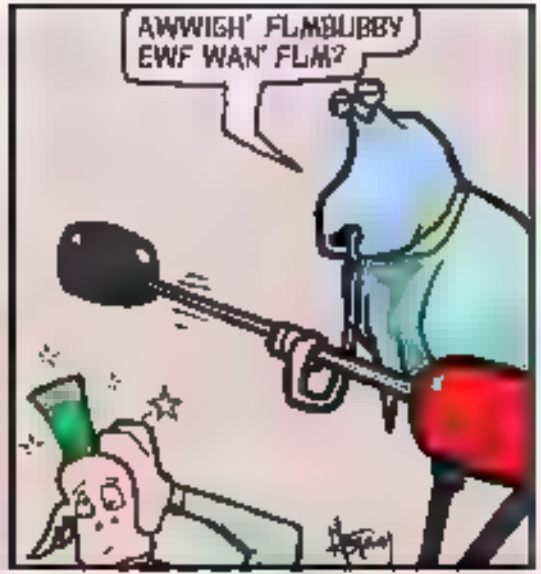
CAPTAIN, YOUR MEN ARE BORED. I CAN TELL, BECAUSE THEY'VE STARTED HITTING ON ME AGAIN.
DOCTOR, I ASSURE YOU, MEN DO NOT NEED TO BE BORED TO HIT ON *YOU*. THE COLONEL, ON THE OTHER HAND...
IS ANXIOUS TO RECEIVE *HER* BACKHANDED COMPLIMENT
I THINK HE BRUISED HIS BRAIN WHEN HE PUT HIS FOOT IN HIS MOUTH.
IT'S A COMMON CONDITION AMONG MEN, I'M TOLD

CAPTAIN, I AGREE WITH THE DOCTOR THE MEN NEED A PHYSICAL DIVERSION.
PERHAPS SOME PUGIL STICK DRILLS WOULD BE A GOOD IDEA
THIS IS A BAD IDEA.

LEGS HAS A SURPRISING APTITUDE FOR HAND-TO-HAND COMBAT

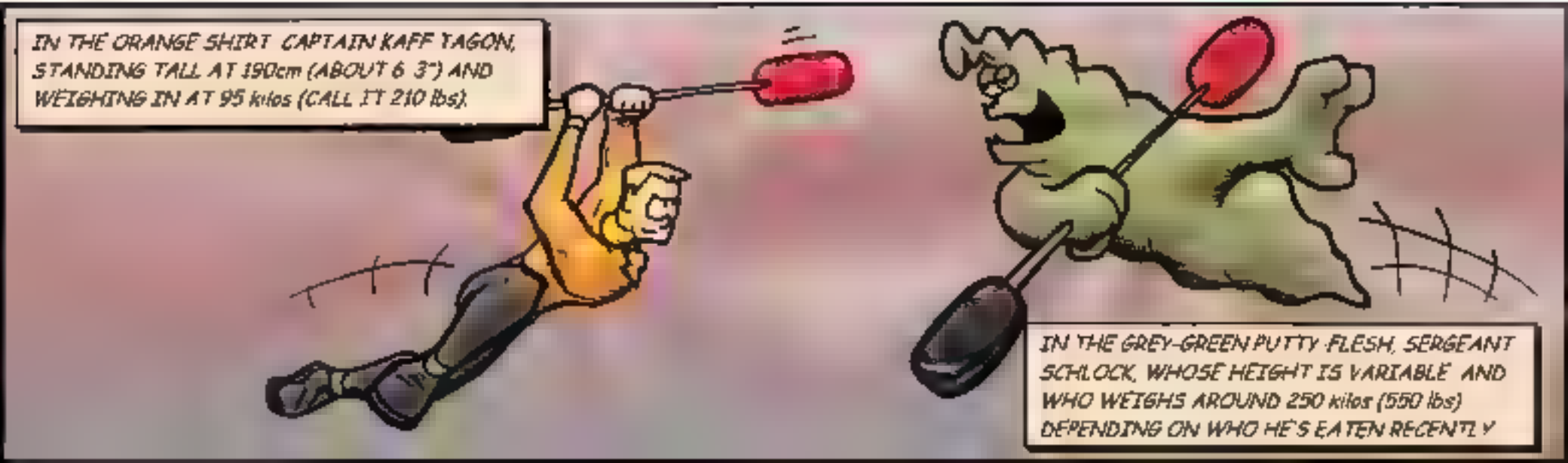
ALTHOUGH I GUESS 'HAND TO-HAND' IS POOR WORD CHOICE IN THIS CASE.
Oh yeah, you gotta watch out for that tongue.

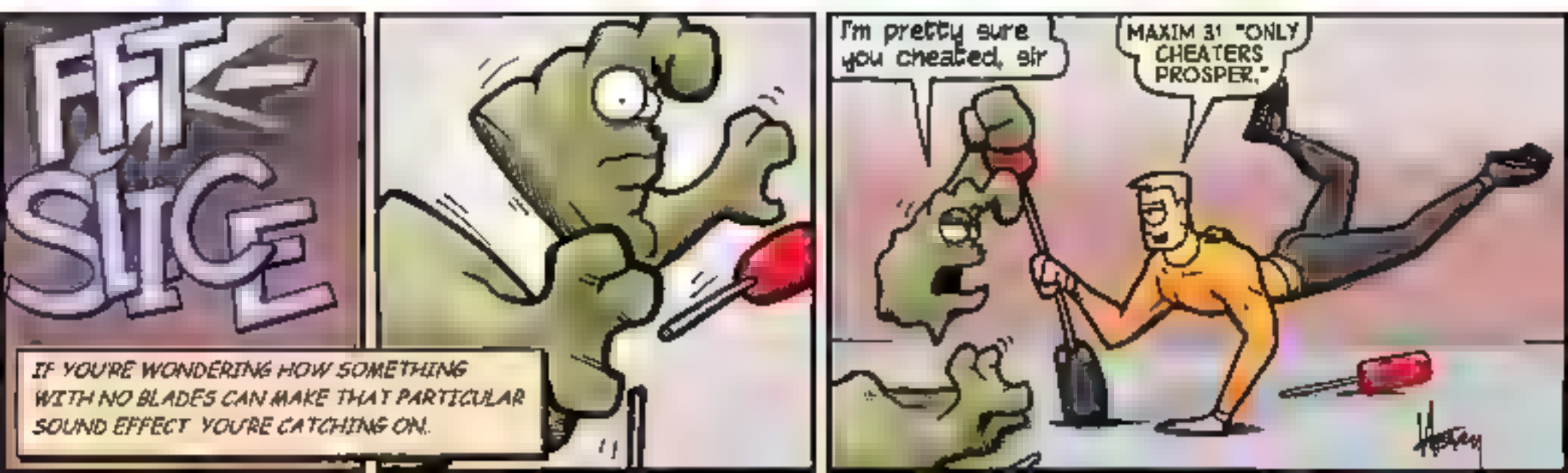
YOU'RE WASHING THE PUGIL STICKS BETWEEN SESSIONS, RIGHT?
We wrote her name on that one.


AWWIGH' FLMBUBBY EWF WAN' FLM?

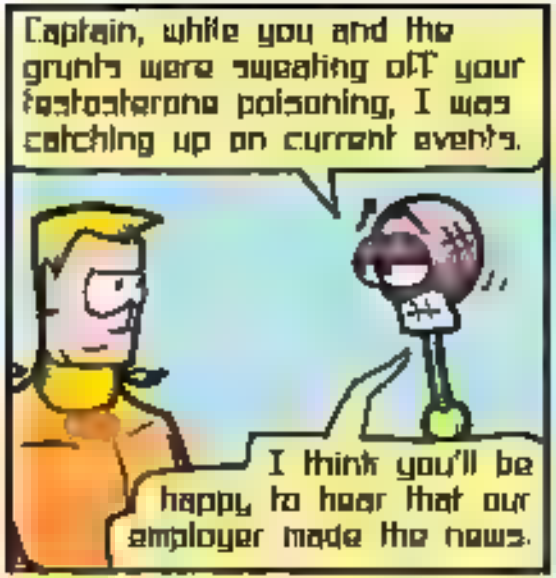
SERGEANT, LET'S GIVE THE MEN A QUICK DEMONSTRATION.
What, you against me? With pugil-sticks?
SURE, IF YOU'RE NOT AFRAID TO TAKE A LITTLE BIT OF A BEATING
Captain, I'm twice your weight, five times your strength, and I can grow extra arms at will.
THAT SOUNDS LIKE FEAR TO ME.
Do you want me to feed you those words before or after I feed you your weapon?

PUGIL STICKS.. THEY LOOK LIKE GIANT Q-TIPS, AND ARE ABOUT AS DANGEROUS... WHICH IS TO SAY THAT THOUGH THEY WON'T FIT IN EARS, THEY CAN STILL LEAVE YOU DEAF AND BLEEDING.
YOU READY, SERGEANT?
For that which you are about to receive, I am truly thankful.
PUGIL STICKS HAVE NO MOVING PARTS, NO ELECTRONICS AND ABSOLUTELY NO SHARP EDGES. PUGIL-STICK COMBAT IS A FORM OF RITUAL COMBAT, WHERE TOUCHES WITH THE COLOR-CODED SWABS ARE SCORED AS HITS. KILLING AND MAIMING IS DONE SYMBOLICALLY. THAT SAID... NO BLOOD, NO FOUL.
Schlock Mercenary

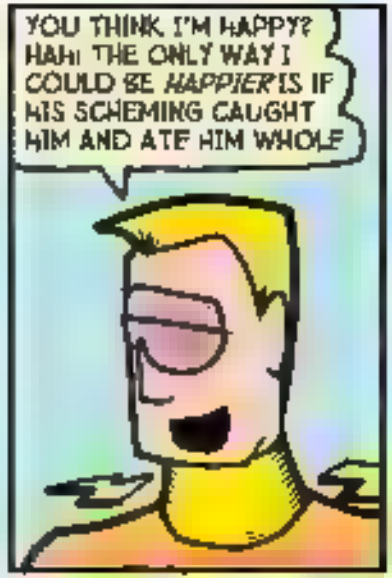

IN THE ORANGE SHIRT CAPTAIN KAFF TAGON, STANDING TALL AT 190cm (ABOUT 6 3") AND WEIGHING IN AT 95 kilos (CALL IT 210 lbs).
IN THE GREY-GREEN PUTTY FLESH, SERGEANT SCHLOCK, WHOSE HEIGHT IS VARIABLE AND WHO WEIGHS AROUND 250 kilos (550 lbs) DEPENDING ON WHO HE'S EATEN RECENTLY

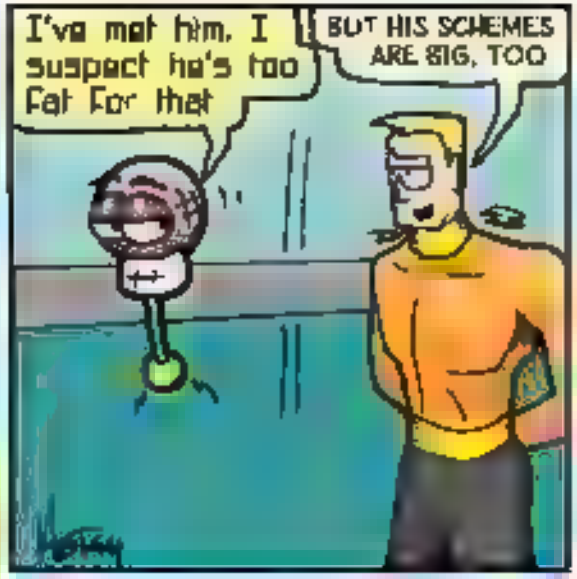

FIT SLICE
IF YOU'RE WONDERING HOW SOMETHING WITH NO BLADES CAN MAKE THAT PARTICULAR SOUND EFFECT YOU'RE CATCHING ON.
I'm pretty sure you cheated, sir
MAXIM 31 "ONLY CHEATERS PROSPER."

Captain, did you watch HM3 today?
NO. I'VE BEEN IN THE GYM SUPERVISING THE PUGIL STICK TRAINING.
AND KICKING SERGEANT SCHLOCK'S BUTT, I MIGHT ADD.
If your foot comes anywhere near where you think I might have a butt, you're not getting it back.
SOMEBODY IS ITCHING FOR A REMATCH.


Captain, while you and the grunts were sweating off your testosterone poisoning, I was catching up on current events.
I think you'll be happy to hear that our employer made the news.

General Xinchub is in deep doo-doo. It looks like some of his scheming is catching up with him.

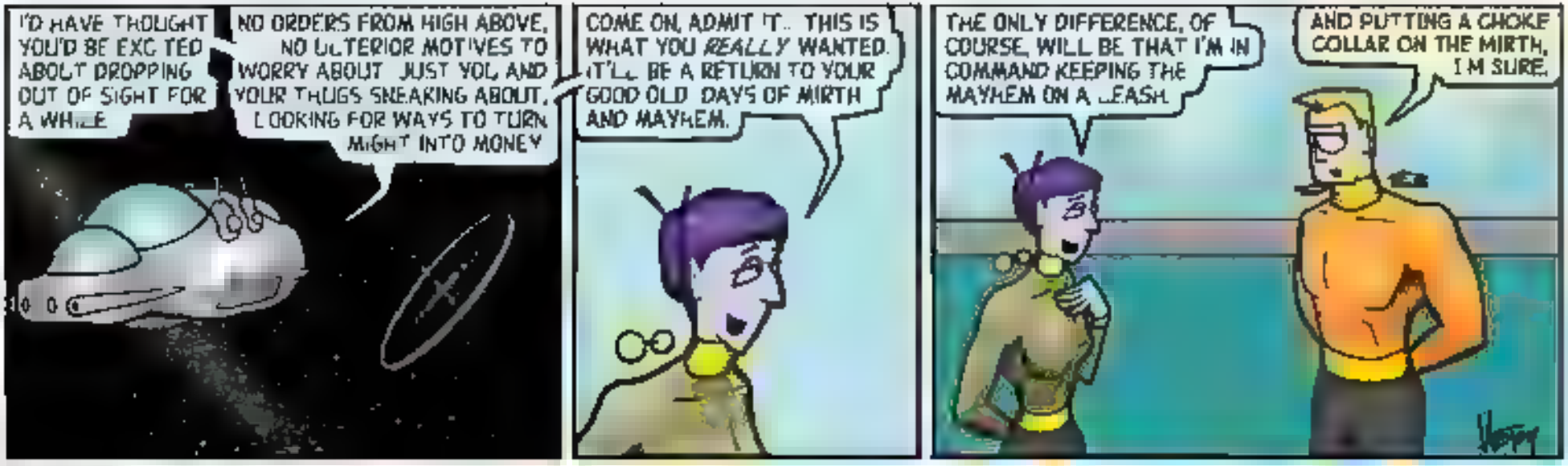

YOU THINK I'M HAPPY? HAH! THE ONLY WAY I COULD BE *HAPPIER* IS IF HIS SCHEMING CAUGHT HIM AND ATE HIM WHOLE

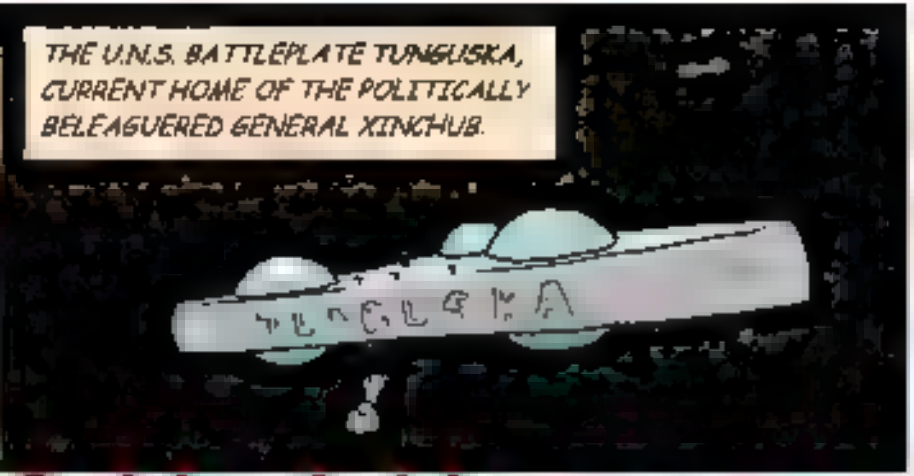

I've met him. I suspect he's too fat for that
BUT HIS SCHEMES ARE BIG, TOO

COLONEL, HAVE YOU HEARD ABOUT GENERAL XINCHUB? ENNESBY TOLD ME HE GOT CREAMED BY THE PRESS
I WATCH THE NEWS FOR MYSELF THANK YOU.
SORRY I FIGURED YOU'D BE *HAPPY* TO SEE THE MAN WHO PULLS OUR STRINGS STRUNG UP HIMSELF FOR ONCE.
AND WHEN HE GETS 'STRUNG UP,' OUR STRINGS WILL GET PULLED EVEN HARDER LIKELY BY THOSE INCLINED TO GARROTE US WITH THEM.
CAN I START OVER WITH A FRESH ANALOGY?
IT WOULD JUST BE MORE ROPE WITH WHICH YOU'D HANG YOURSELF AGAIN, I SUSPECT

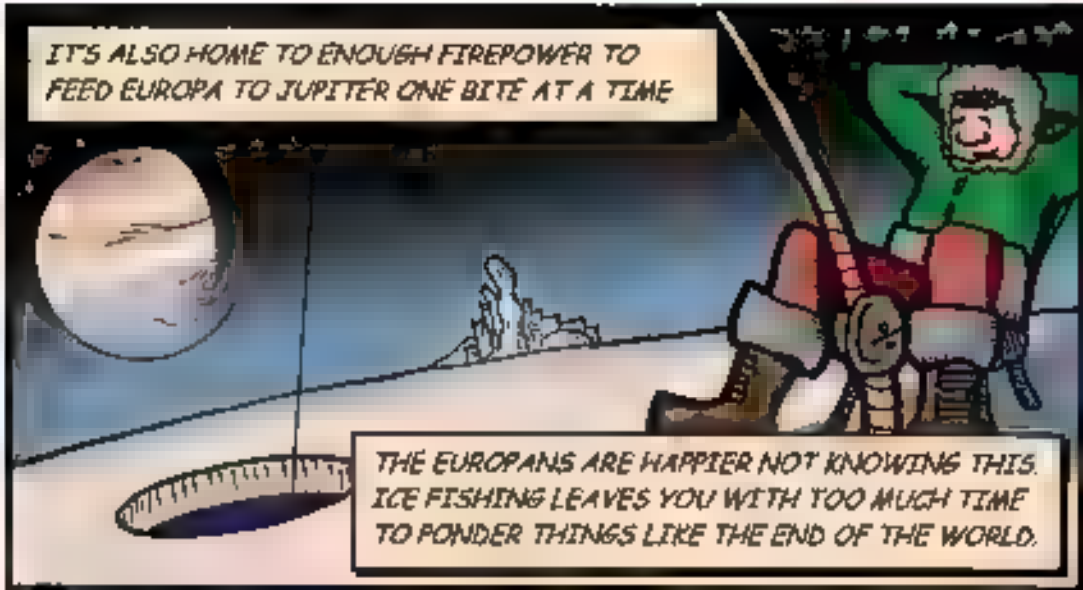
YOU'RE GOING TO HAVE TO TRUST ME, CAPTAIN. I KNOW GENERAL XINCHUB A LOT BETTER THAN YOU DO.
IN A SITUATION LIKE THIS HE BECOMES *MORE* DANGEROUS.. ESPECIALLY TO *POTENTIAL LIABILITIES* LIKE US.
IN FACT THAT'S EXACTLY WHAT I TOLD HIM WHEN I CALLED HIM FIFTEEN MINUTES AGO
YOU *WHAT?!?*
THE GOOD NEWS IS THAT WE NOW HAVE NEW ORDERS INSTEAD OF AN INBOUND TERAPEDO

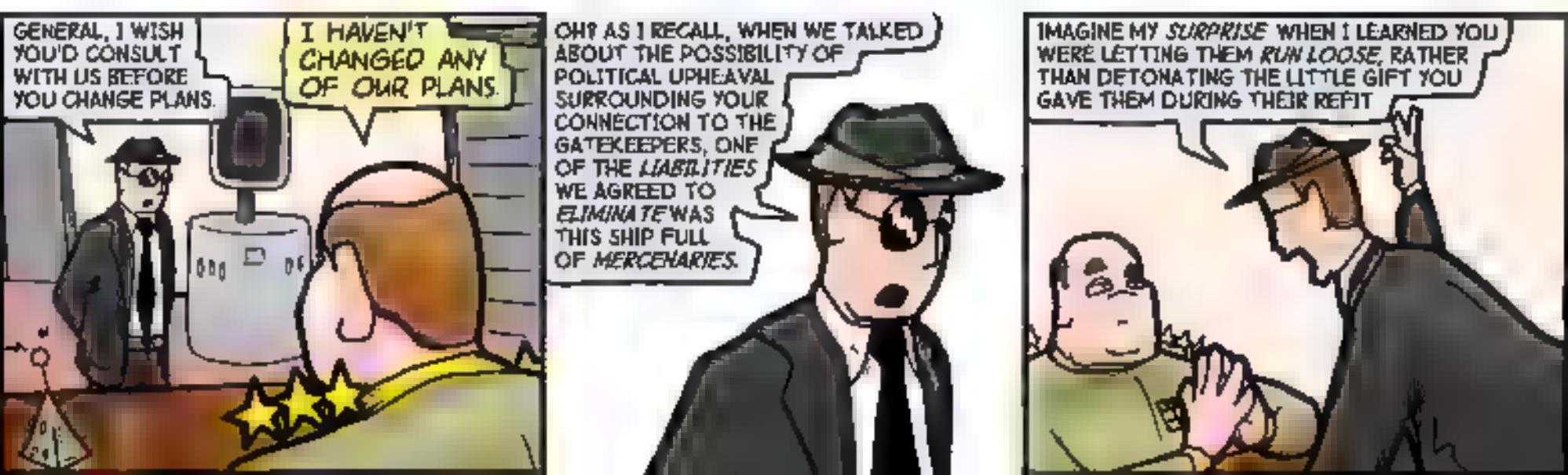
COLONEL, IF THE GENERAL WANTS US *DEAD*, THESE NEW ORDERS FROM HIM WILL BE FOR A *SUICIDE MISSION*.
I KNOW THAT. I TOLD HIM WE'D BE LESS OF A LIABILITY IF WE RAN COMPLETELY BLACK FOR A WHILE.
OH, THAT'S *GREAT*. THAT WAY WHEN THINGS HAVE QUIETED DOWN, AND WE COME UP FOR AIR, OR MONEY, OR RE-SUPPLY, WE'LL GET A NICE EXPLOSIVE PACKAGE FROM HIM THAT SAYS *"SO NICE TO SEE YOU AGAIN"* IN A WAY THAT ONLY MULTI-MEGATON YIELDS CAN.
WE'LL CROSS THAT BRIDGE WHEN WE COME TO IT.
CROSS IT? I'M MAKING PLANS TO DESTROY THE BRIDGE FROM ORBIT.

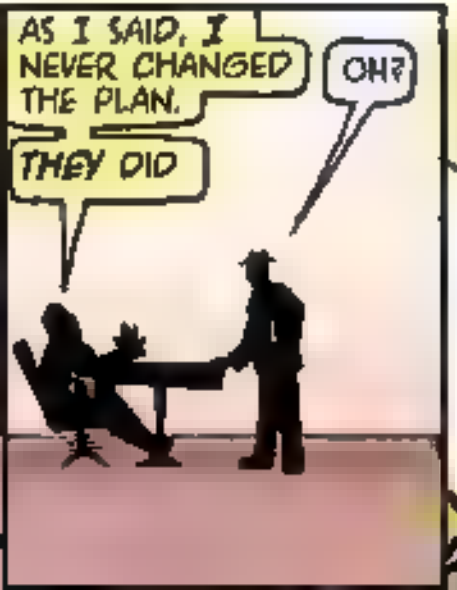

I'D HAVE THOUGHT YOU'D BE EXCITED ABOUT DROPPING OUT OF SIGHT FOR A WHILE
NO ORDERS FROM HIGH ABOVE, NO ULTERIOR MOTIVES TO WORRY ABOUT JUST YOU, AND YOUR THUGS SNEAKING ABOUT, LOOKING FOR WAYS TO TURN MIGHT INTO MONEY
COME ON, ADMIT IT.. THIS IS WHAT YOU *REALLY* WANTED. IT'LL BE A RETURN TO YOUR GOOD OLD DAYS OF MIRTH AND MAYHEM.
THE ONLY DIFFERENCE, OF COURSE, WILL BE THAT I'M IN COMMAND KEEPING THE MAYHEM ON A LEASH.
AND PUTTING A CHOKE COLLAR ON THE MIRTH, I'M SURE.



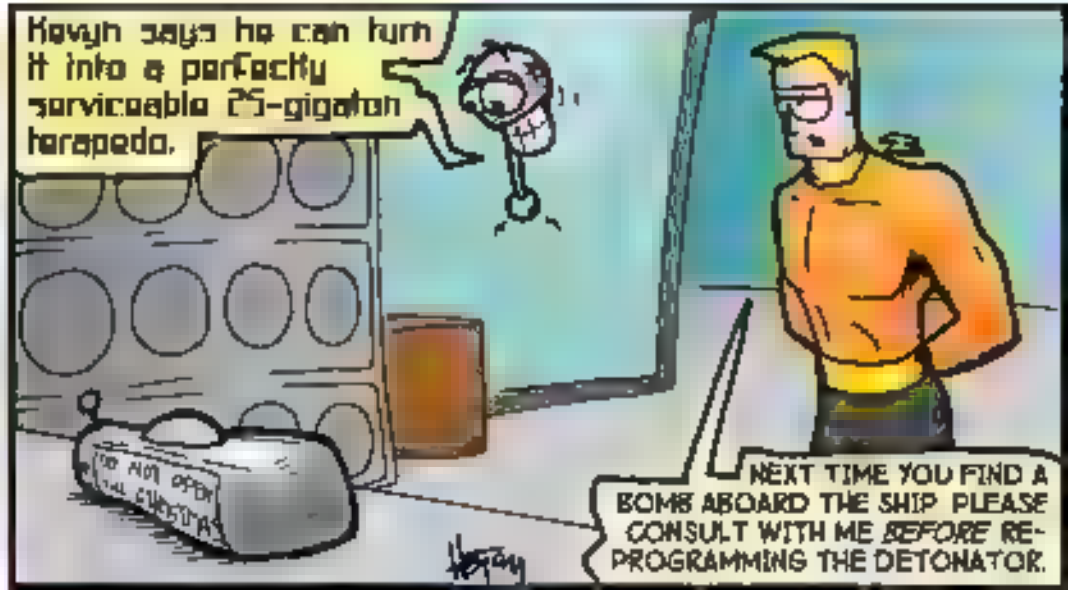
Schlock Mercenary




GENERAL, I WISH YOU'D CONSULT WITH US BEFORE YOU CHANGE PLANS.
I HAVEN'T CHANGED ANY OF OUR PLANS.
OH? AS I RECALL, WHEN WE TALKED ABOUT THE POSSIBILITY OF POLITICAL UPHEAVAL SURROUNDING YOUR CONNECTION TO THE GATEKEEPERS, ONE OF THE *LIABILITIES* WE AGREED TO *ELIMINATE* WAS THIS SHIP FULL OF *MERCENARIES*.
IMAGINE MY *SURPRISE* WHEN I LEARNED YOU WERE LETTING THEM *RUN LOOSE*, RATHER THAN DETONATING THE LITTLE GIFT YOU GAVE THEM DURING THEIR REFIT

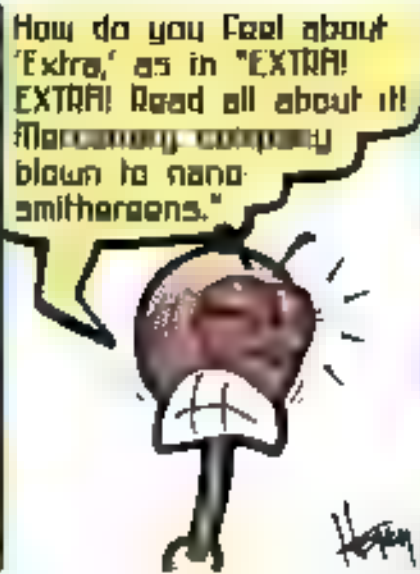

AS I SAID, I NEVER CHANGED THE PLAN.
OH?
THEY DID

I SENT THE DETONATION SIGNAL, AND GOT A VERY COLORFUL CODED RESPONSE IN REPLY

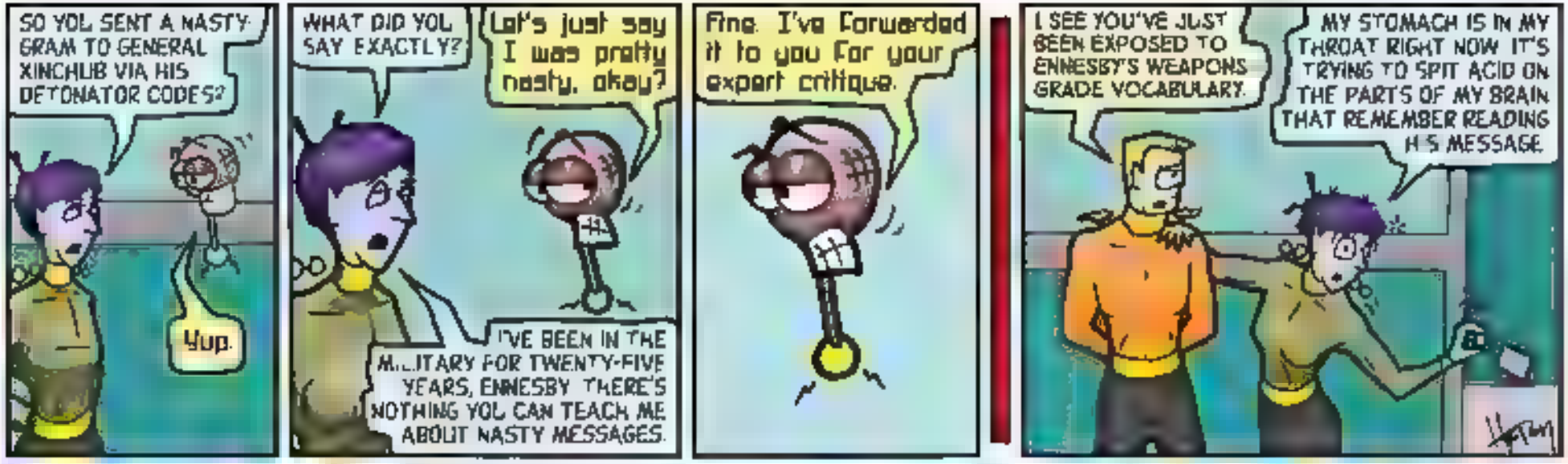

Kevyn says he can turn it into a perfectly serviceable 25-gigaton torpedo.
NEXT TIME YOU FIND A BOMB ABOARD THE SHIP PLEASE CONSULT WITH ME *BEFORE* RE-PROGRAMMING THE DETONATOR.

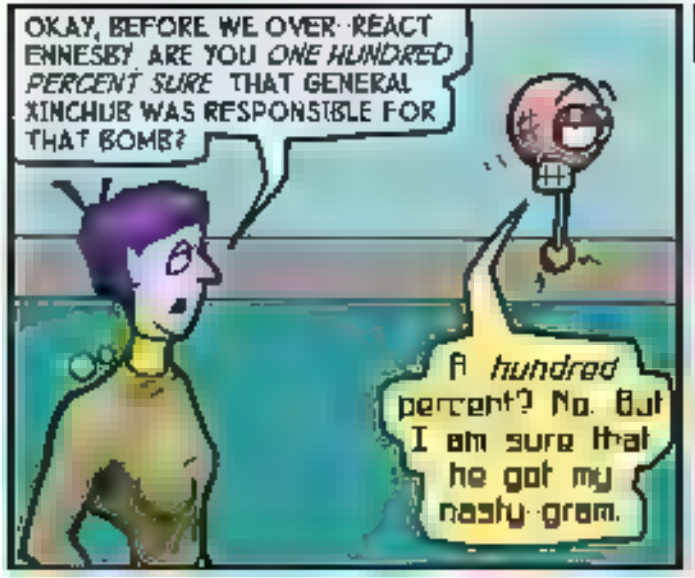
COLONEL, DID YOU KNOW THAT ENNESBY FOUND AN EXTRA TC WARHEAD IN OUR MUNITIONS STORE?
NO. WHAT DO YOU MEAN BY "EXTRA?"

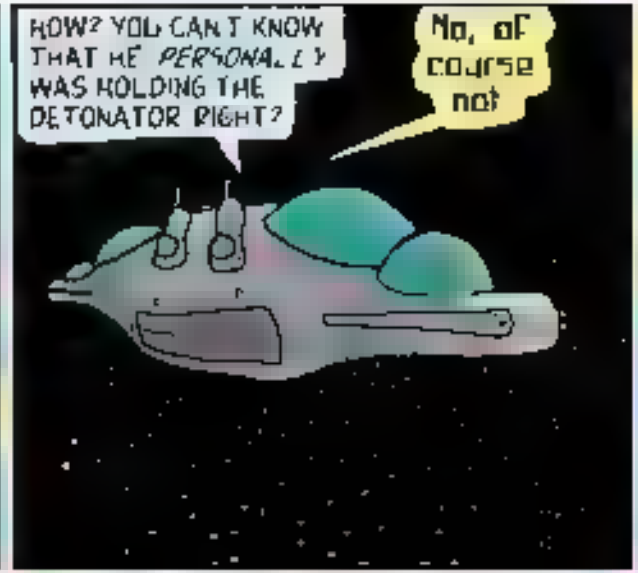
YOU KNOW *EXTRA*, AS IN "NOT ON THE INVENTORY LIST, BUT MIXED IN WITH THE REST OF THE MUNITIONS ANYWAY."
I'M OKAY WITH EXTRA, I GUESS.

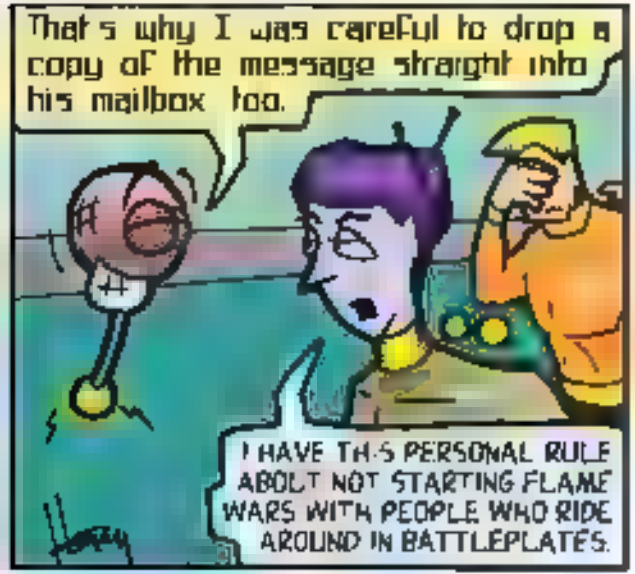

How do you feel about 'Extra,' as in "EXTRA! EXTRA! Read all about it! Mercenary company blown to nano-smitheroens."

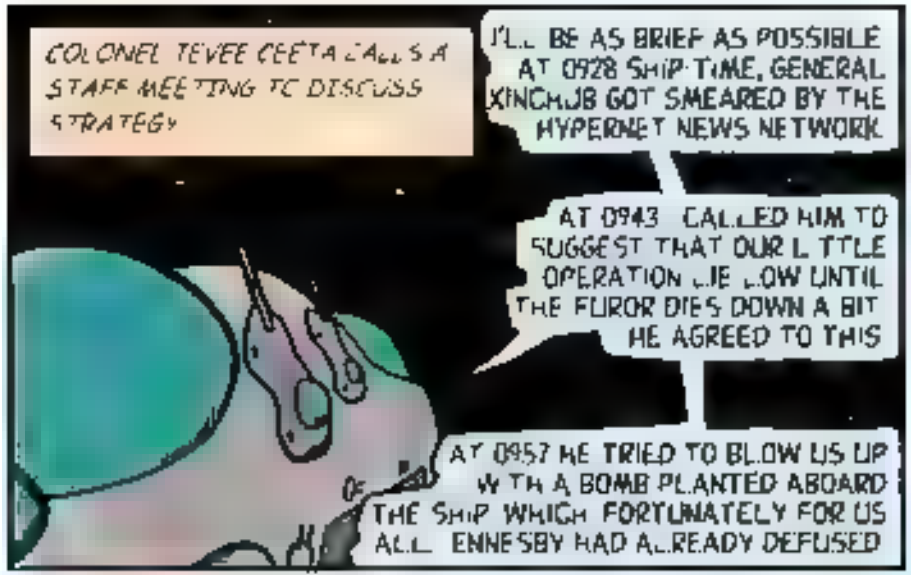
YOU'VE GOT A REAL WAY WITH WORDS, ENNESBY
That wasn't too "over-the-top," was it?


SO YOU SENT A NASTY GRAM TO GENERAL XINCHUB VIA HIS DETONATOR CODES?
Yup.
WHAT DID YOU SAY EXACTLY?
Let's just say I was pretty nasty, okay?
I'VE BEEN IN THE MILITARY FOR TWENTY-FIVE YEARS, ENNESBY. THERE'S NOTHING YOU CAN TEACH ME ABOUT NASTY MESSAGES.
Fine. I've forwarded it to you for your expert critique.
I SEE YOU'VE JUST BEEN EXPOSED TO ENNESBY'S WEAPONS GRADE VOCABULARY.
MY STOMACH IS IN MY THROAT RIGHT NOW. IT'S TRYING TO SPIT ACID ON THE PARTS OF MY BRAIN THAT REMEMBER READING HIS MESSAGE.

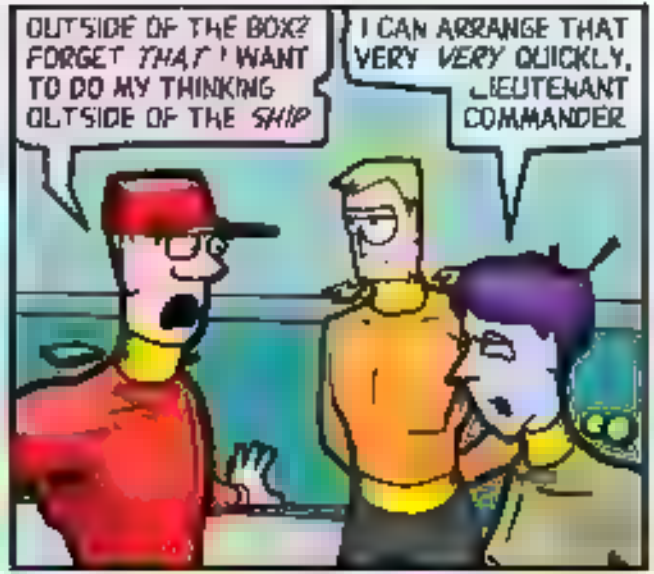

OKAY, BEFORE WE OVER-REACT ENNESBY ARE YOU *ONE HUNDRED PERCENT SURE* THAT GENERAL XINCHUB WAS RESPONSIBLE FOR THAT BOMB?
A *hundred* percent? No. But I am sure that he got my nasty-gram.


HOW? YOU CAN'T KNOW THAT HE *PERSONALLY* WAS HOLDING THE DETONATOR RIGHT?
No, of course not

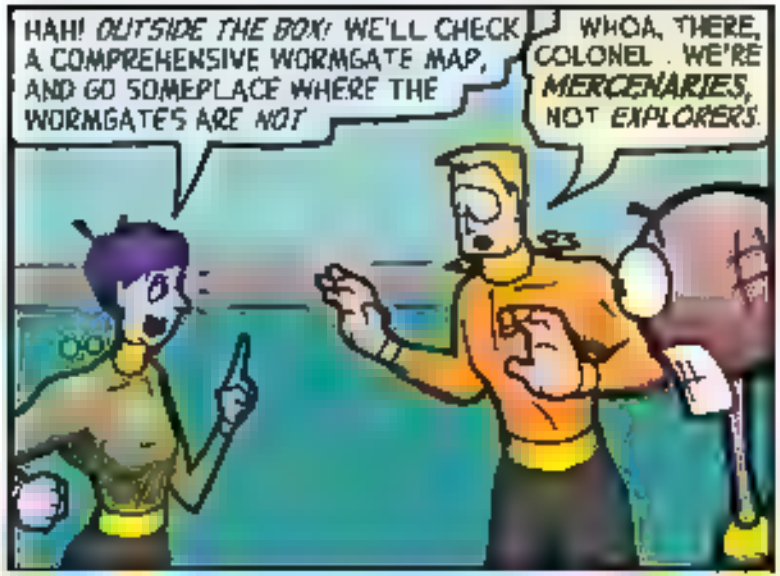

That's why I was careful to drop a copy of the message straight into his mailbox too.
I HAVE THIS PERSONAL RULE ABOUT NOT STARTING FLAME WARS WITH PEOPLE WHO RIDE AROUND IN BATTLEPLATES.


COLONEL TEVEE CEETA CALLS A STAFF MEETING TO DISCUSS STRATEGY
I'LL BE AS BRIEF AS POSSIBLE AT 0928 SHIP TIME, GENERAL XINCHUB GOT SMEARED BY THE HYPERNET NEWS NETWORK
AT 0943 CALLED HIM TO SUGGEST THAT OUR LITTLE OPERATION LIE LOW UNTIL THE FUROR DIES DOWN A BIT HE AGREED TO THIS
AT 0957 HE TRIED TO BLOW US UP WITH A BOMB PLANTED ABOARD THE SHIP WHICH FORTUNATELY FOR US ALL ENNESBY HAD ALREADY DEFUSED

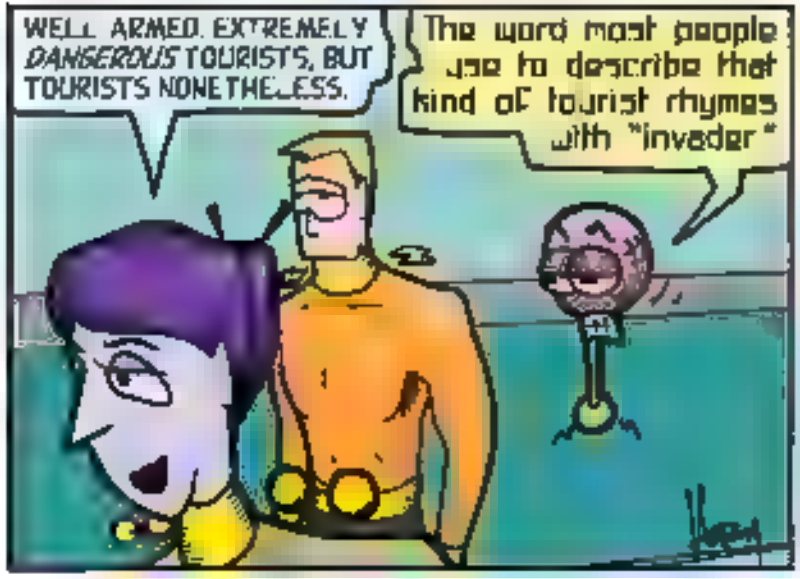
IT'S NOW 1048. BY 1100 I WANT A PLAN THAT KEEPS US ALIVE FOR AT LEAST THE NEXT WEEK. DON'T BE AFRAID TO THINK OUTSIDE OF THE BOX


OUTSIDE OF THE BOX? FORGET *THAT*! WANT TO DO MY THINKING OUTSIDE OF THE *SHIP*
I CAN ARRANGE THAT VERY *VERY* QUICKLY, LIEUTENANT COMMANDER

We're safe on the ship. If the General had backup plans for sabotaging us, he would have used them by now.
YOU KNOW YOU *REALLY* SHOULDN'T HAVE CALLED HIM THAT
SO WE CAN STAY ON THE SHIP, BUT WHERE CAN WE GO WHERE WE WON'T RUN THE RISK OF BEING
THERE ARE OVER 100,000 SETTLED STAR SYSTEMS IN THE WORMGATE REGISTRY U.N.S. AGENTS CAN'T POSSIBLY MONITOR *ALL* OF THEM.
AH THE "WE'RE TOO LUCKY TO DIE" PLAN HATE T ALREADY
IT'S SERVED US WELL IN THE PAST


HAH! OUTSIDE THE BOX! WE'LL CHECK A COMPREHENSIVE WORMGATE MAP, AND GO SOMEPLACE WHERE THE WORMGATES ARE NOT
WHOA, THERE, COLONEL . WE'RE MERCENARIES, NOT EXPLORERS.

I WAS THINKING MORE ALONG THE LINES OF TOURIST


WELL ARMED. EXTREMELY DANGEROUS TOURISTS, BUT TOURISTS NONETHELESS.
The word most people use to describe that kind of tourist rhymes with "invader"

THE WORMGATE NETWORK CONNECTS OVER A HUNDRED THOUSAND STAR SYSTEMS IN THE MILKY-WAY GALAXY

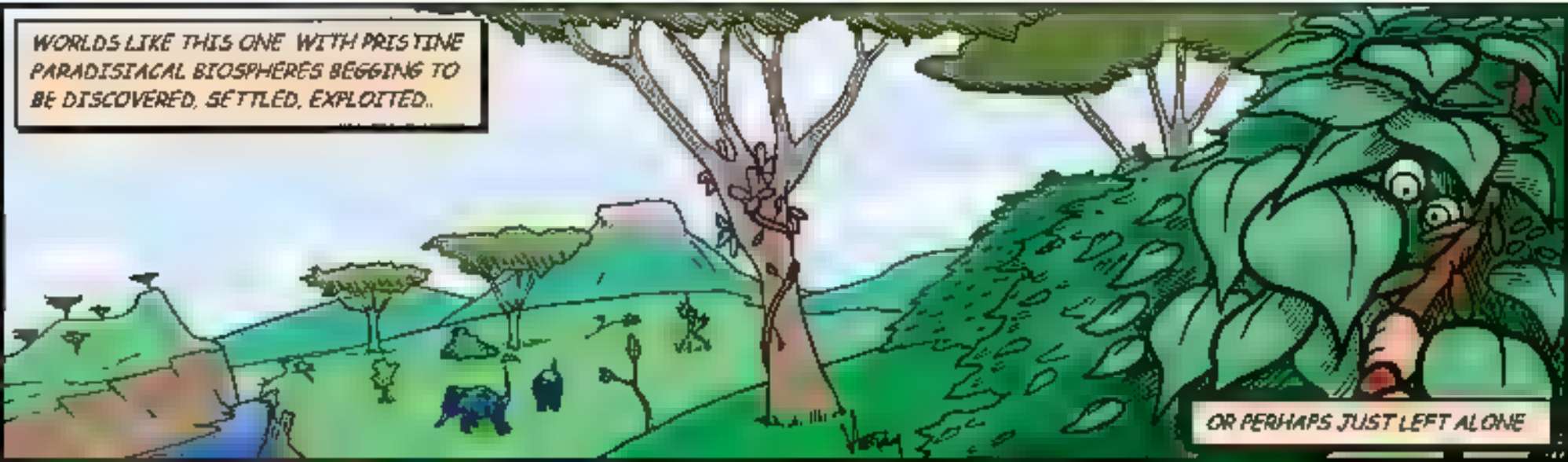
Schlock Mercenary

FOR AT LEAST THAT MANY YEARS IT HAS BEEN THE ONLY WAY TO GET AROUND. AT LEAST AT SPEEDS THAT MAKE ANY REAL DIFFERENCE

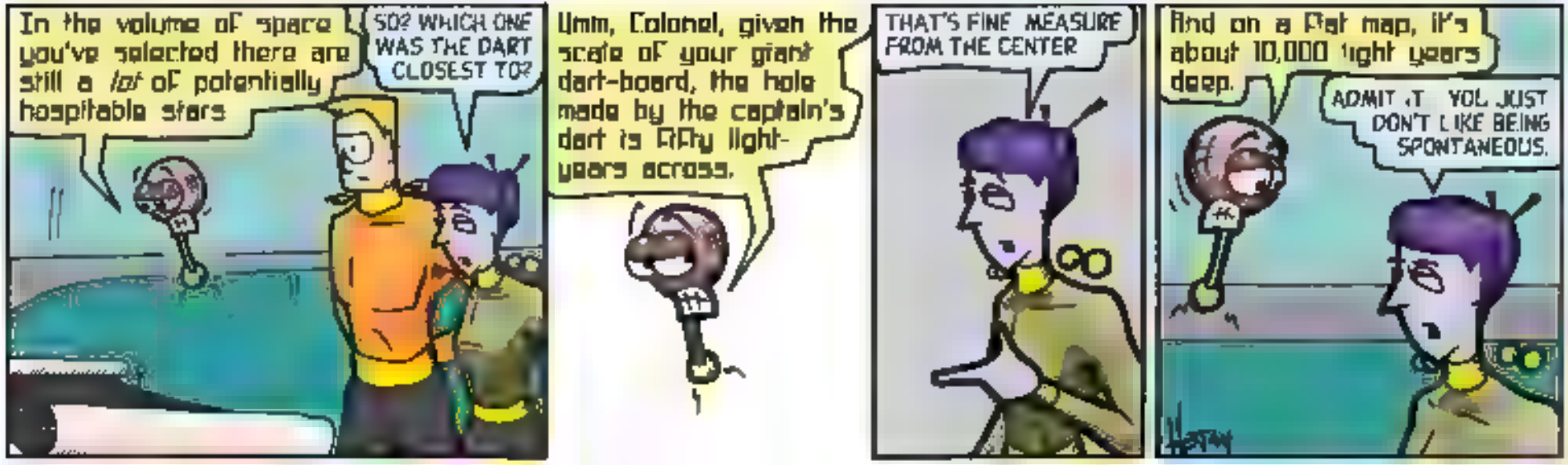
NEW CIVILIZATIONS JOINED THE WORMGATE NETWORK ONLY WHEN A PRE-TUNED WORMGATE ARRIVED IN THEIR STAR SYSTEM.. IT HAPPENED TO HUMANITY AND SOL SYSTEM ABOUT A THOUSAND YEARS AGO.

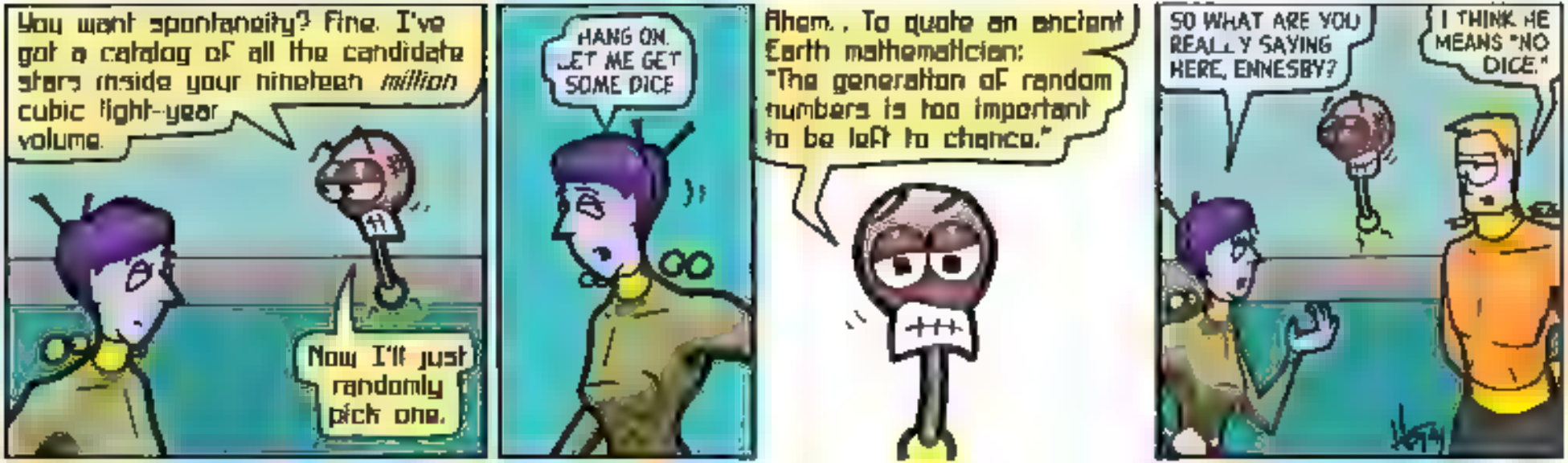
THE MILKY WAY IS A BIG PLACE, THOUGH, AND THE GALAXY-SPANNING WORMGATE CIVILIZATION IS LIKE A FISHNET THERE IS MUCH, MUCH MORE EMPTY SPACE IN IT THAN THERE IS ROPE

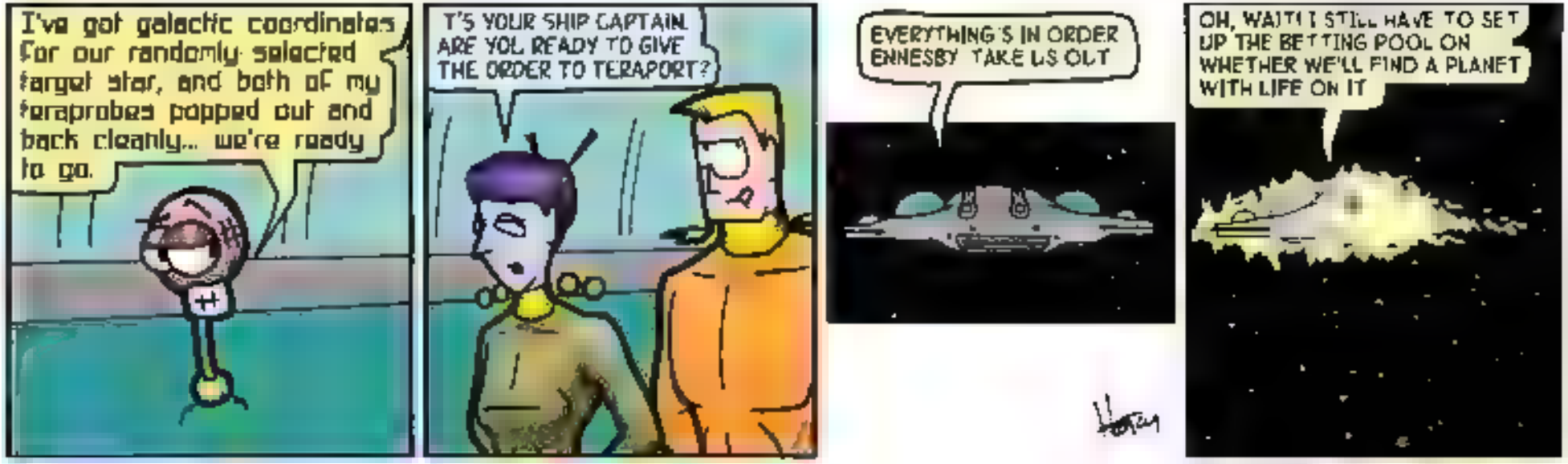
AND SOME OF THAT EMPTY SPACE IS RATHER LESS THAN COMPLETELY EMPTY FULL INSTEAD OF UNCHARTED STAR SYSTEMS MUCKING GREAT NEBULAE HOTTER THAN YOU'D REALLY LIKE TO THINK ABOUT AND COUNTLESS ROCKY WORLDS WORLDS THAT AS OF ABOUT A YEAR AGO THE INTREPID TRAVELER COULD ACTUALLY GET TO USING THE TERAPORT

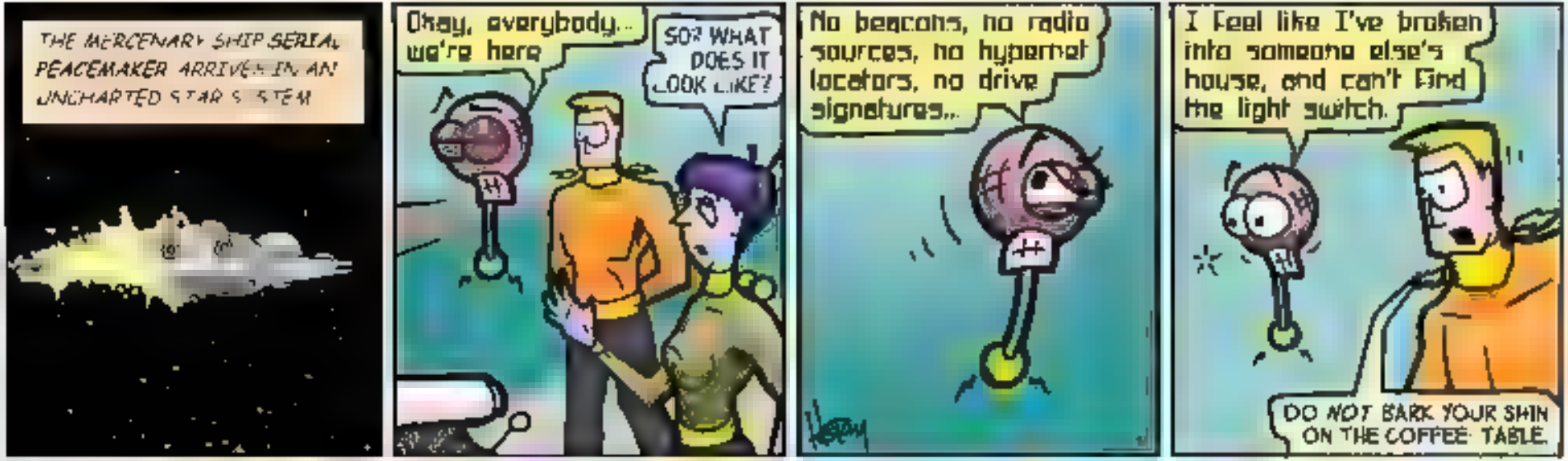

WORLDS LIKE THIS ONE WITH PRISTINE PARADISIACAL BIOSPHERES BEGGING TO BE DISCOVERED, SETTLED, EXPLOITED..
OR PERHAPS JUST LEFT ALONE

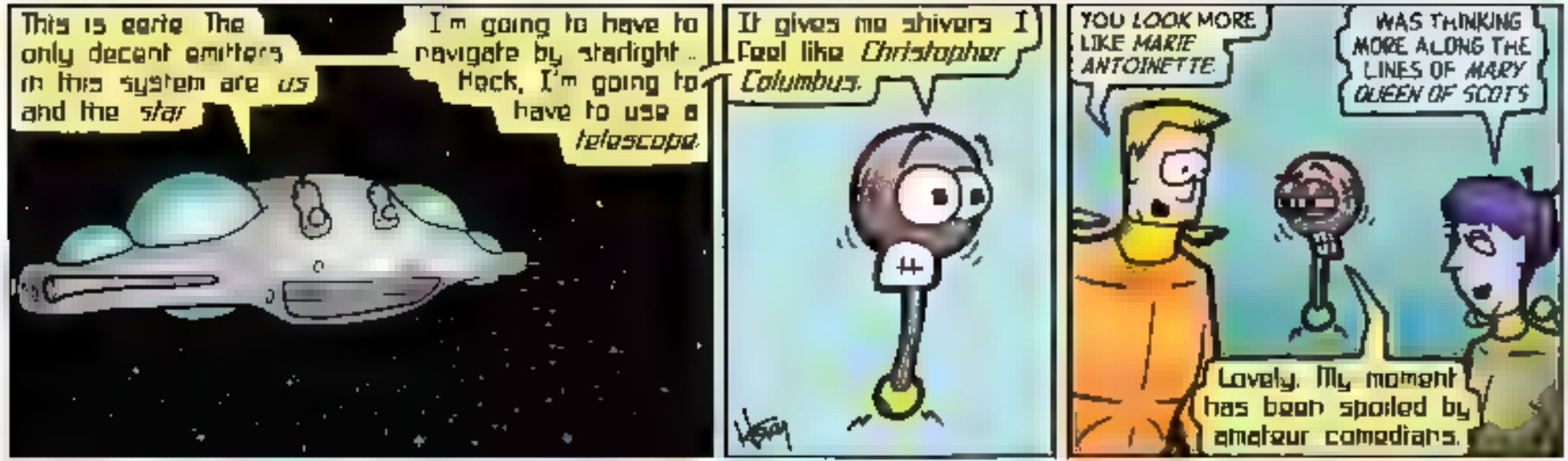
UNCHARTED SPACE IS PRETTY BIG, COLONEL. DO YOU HAVE SUGGESTIONS FOR HOW WE SELECT OUR DESTINATION?
RUMMAGE RUMMAGE
I'VE GOT A GALACTIC SURVEY MAP WE CAN MOUNT ON THE WALL IN THE GYM. LET'S GO
HAH! BULLSEYE!
THAT'S THE GALACTIC CORE, TAGON. WE DON'T WANT TO GO THERE


In the volume of space you've selected there are still a *lot* of potentially hospitable stars
SO? WHICH ONE WAS THE DART CLOSEST TO?
Umm, Colonel, given the scale of your giant dart-board, the hole made by the captain's dart is fifty light-years across.
THAT'S FINE. MEASURE FROM THE CENTER
And on a flat map, it's about 10,000 light years deep.
ADMIT IT. YOU JUST DON'T LIKE BEING SPONTANEOUS.


You want spontaneity? Fine. I've got a catalog of all the candidate stars inside your nineteen *million* cubic light-year volume.
Now I'll just randomly pick one.
HANG ON. LET ME GET SOME DICE
Ahem. . To quote an ancient Earth mathematician: "The generation of random numbers is too important to be left to chance."
SO WHAT ARE YOU REALLY SAYING HERE, ENNESBY?
I THINK HE MEANS "NO DICE."


I've got galactic coordinates for our randomly selected target star, and both of my teraprobes popped out and back cleanly... we're ready to go.
T'S YOUR SHIP CAPTAIN ARE YOU READY TO GIVE THE ORDER TO TERAPORT?
EVERYTHING'S IN ORDER ENNESBY TAKE US OUT
OH, WAIT! I STILL HAVE TO SET UP THE BETTING POOL ON WHETHER WE'LL FIND A PLANET WITH LIFE ON IT


THE MERCENARY SHIP SERIAL PEACEMAKER ARRIVES IN AN UNCHARTED STAR SYSTEM
Okay, everybody... we're here
SO? WHAT DOES IT LOOK LIKE?
No beacons, no radio sources, no hyperwat locators, no drive signatures...
I feel like I've broken into someone else's house, and can't find the light switch.
DO NOT BARK YOUR SHIN ON THE COFFEE TABLE.


This is eerie. The only decent emitters in this system are *us* and the *star*.
I'm going to have to navigate by starlight... Heck, I'm going to have to use a *telescope*.
It gives me shivers. I feel like *Christopher Columbus*.
YOU LOOK MORE LIKE *MARIE ANTOINETTE*.
WAS THINKING MORE ALONG THE LINES OF *MARY QUEEN OF SCOTS*.
Lovely. My moment has been spoiled by amateur comedians.

UNCHARTED WATERS - A NAVIGATOR'S NIGHTMARE AN EXPLORER'S CHALLENGE AND A FUGITIVE'S FRIEND.

I've done a passive scan, and now have answers to our two most pressing questions

Schlock Mercenary

First, on our current course we're not going to hit anything, and nothing is going to hit us.

Second, it looks like we're alone here, so this is probably a good place to hide.

OKAY, THEN. WHAT ELSE CAN YOU TELL US ABOUT THE SYSTEM?

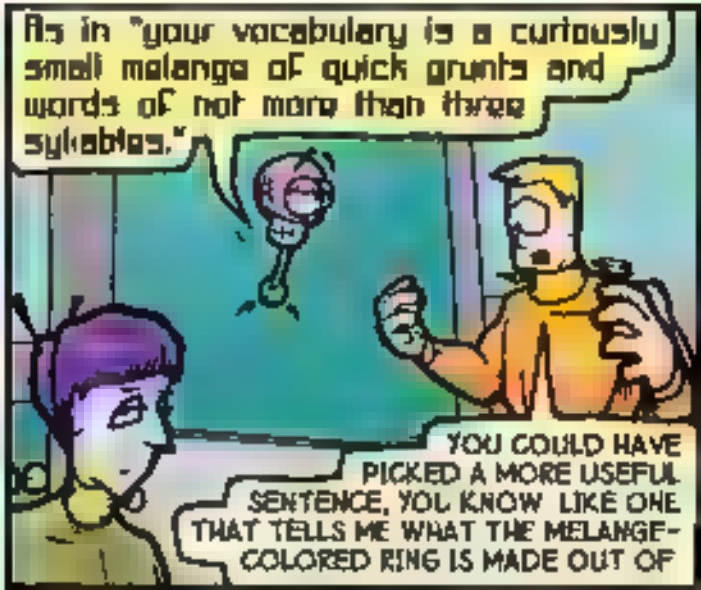
Well, it has two rocky inner planets, two gas giants, and a pretty impressive debris ring.

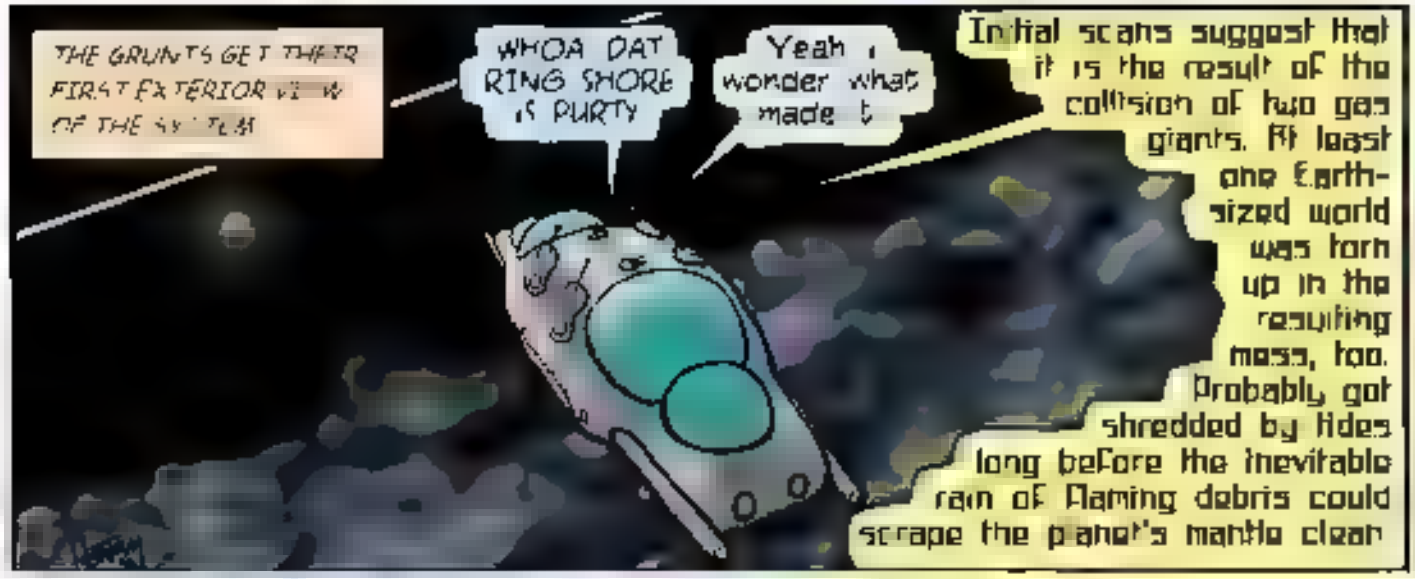
YOU MEAN AN ASTEROID BELT, LIKE THE ONE IN SOL SYSTEM?
There are asteroids in it, but no, that's not what I said.

Sol system's asteroid belt isn't visible to the naked eye.

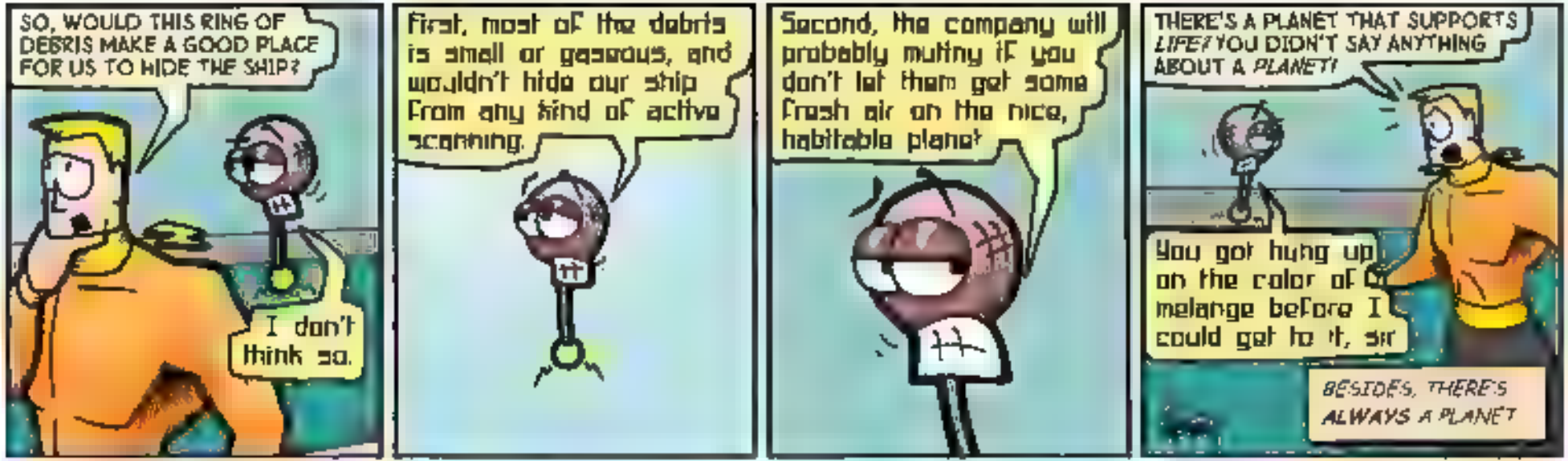
SO WHAT IS IT? GAS? ICE CRYSTALS?
It's a melange.
I DIDN'T ASK WHAT COLOR IT IS.
And I didn't tell you.

SO... MELANGE ISN'T A COLOR, THEN.
No, it means 'mixture,' and implies random variety.


As in "your vocabulary is a curiously small melange of quick grunts and words of not more than three syllables."
YOU COULD HAVE PICKED A MORE USEFUL SENTENCE, YOU KNOW LIKE ONE THAT TELLS ME WHAT THE MELANGE-COLORED RING IS MADE OUT OF


THE GRUNTS GET THEIR FIRST EXTERIOR VIEW OF THE SYSTEM
WHOA DAT RING SHORE IS PURTY
Yeah, I wonder what made it
Initial scans suggest that it is the result of the collision of two gas giants. At least one Earth-sized world was torn up in the resulting mess, too. Probably got shredded by tides long before the inevitable rain of flaming debris could scrape the planet's mantle clean

I think we were happier wondering what made it.
Fine. Remind me not to tell you where sunlight comes from.

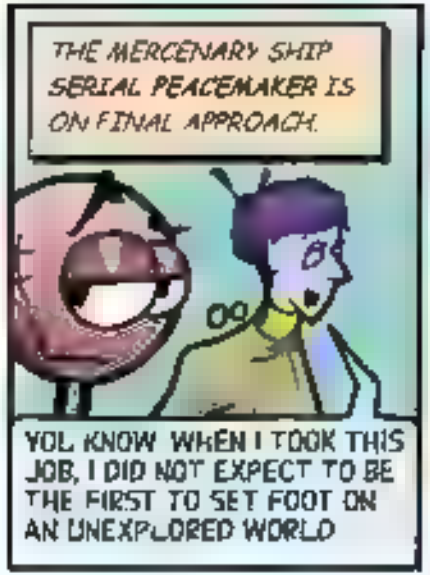

SO, WOULD THIS RING OF DEBRIS MAKE A GOOD PLACE FOR US TO HIDE THE SHIP?
I don't think so.
First, most of the debris is small or gaseous, and wouldn't hide our ship from any kind of active scanning.
Second, the company will probably mutiny if you don't let them get some fresh air on the nice, habitable planet
THERE'S A PLANET THAT SUPPORTS *LIFE!* YOU DIDN'T SAY ANYTHING ABOUT A *PLANET!*
You got hung up on the color of melange before I could get to it, sir
BESIDES, THERE'S ALWAYS A PLANET

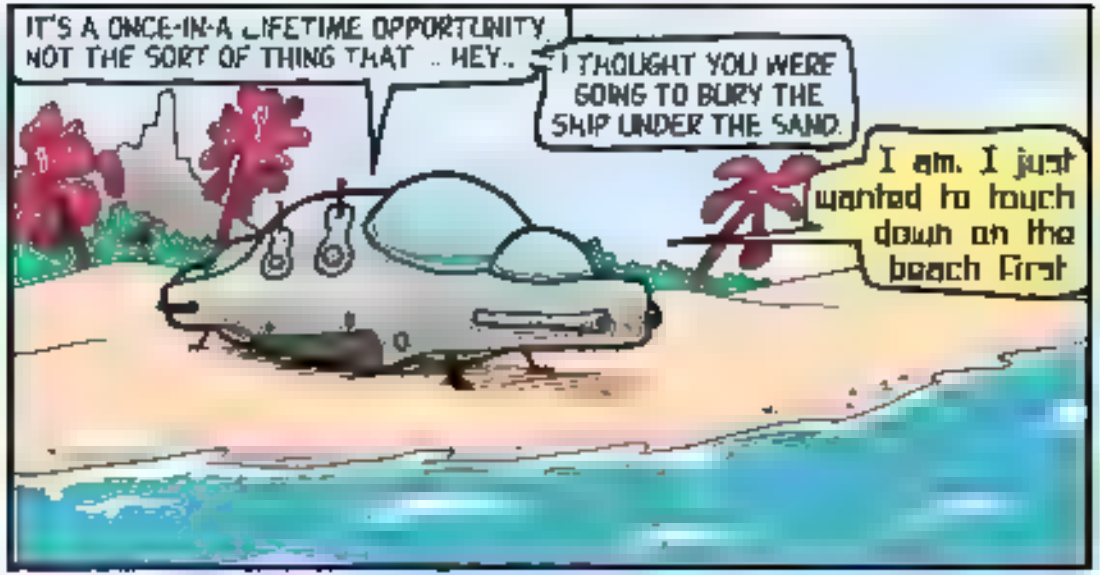
SO. A LIFE BEARING PLANET
OBVIOUSLY IT'S MY PREROGATIVE AS SENIOR OFFICER TO STEP FIRST ON THIS NEW WORLD

I THOUGHT THAT THE COMMAND STAFF WAS EXPECTED TO STAY CLEAR OF ANY CONTESTED AREA UNTIL IT HAD BEEN SECURED.
IN COMBAT YES BUT THIS 'S NOT COMBAT IT'S *EXPLORATION*, AND ALL THE GREAT EXPLORERS BLAZED TRAILS WITH THEIR OWN HANDS

WHAT HAPPENED TO US BEING *TOURISTS*, COLONEL?
EXPLORERS ARE JUST TOURISTS WITH STURDIER CAMERAS AND NO MAPS.

I've selected a land mass about the size of Europe. It's in what looks like a temperate zone.
We'll land on the coast, and I'll bury the ship under the sand. That should obscure us from any scan short of ground-penetrating short-range stuff.
IS THERE ANY WAY TO PREVENT THAT FROM HAPPENING?
Sure. You'll be wandering around on the beach playing at Lewis and Clark...
When your comm suddenly goes dead, I'll know there are hostiles about, and I'll just pop up and shoot them before they can scan for me.
AH, THE OLD "I'LL USE MY COMMANDING OFFICER AS BAIT" PLAN. HATE IT ALREADY


THE MERCENARY SHIP SERIAL PEACEMAKER IS ON FINAL APPROACH.
YOU KNOW WHEN I TOOK THIS JOB, I DID NOT EXPECT TO BE THE FIRST TO SET FOOT ON AN UNEXPLORED WORLD

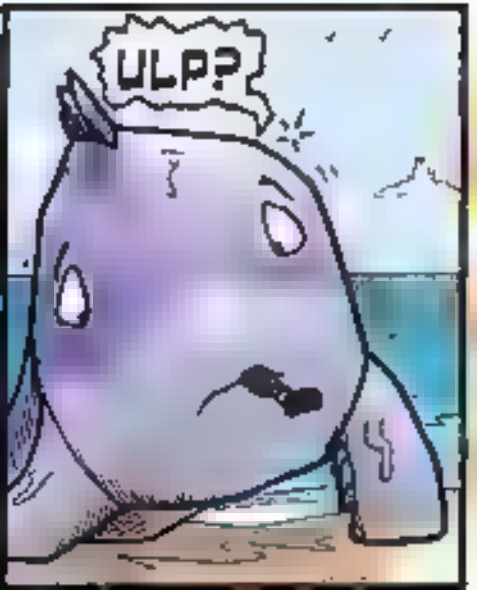

IT'S A ONCE-IN-A LIFETIME OPPORTUNITY. NOT THE SORT OF THING THAT .. HEY..
I THOUGHT YOU WERE GOING TO BURY THE SHIP UNDER THE SAND.
I am. I just wanted to touch down on the beach first

This way, when you teleport up to the surface, you'll get to see my footprints.

A BEACH! WE'RE GONNA GET TA GO TO A REAL BEACH!
WIT' SUN, AN' SAND.. WATER, WAVES, AN BEAUTIFUL WOMEN!
Sorry, Nick. The first woman you're likely to see on the beach is Colonel Costa.
I won't tell her about the look on your face if you promise not to repeat what I said.

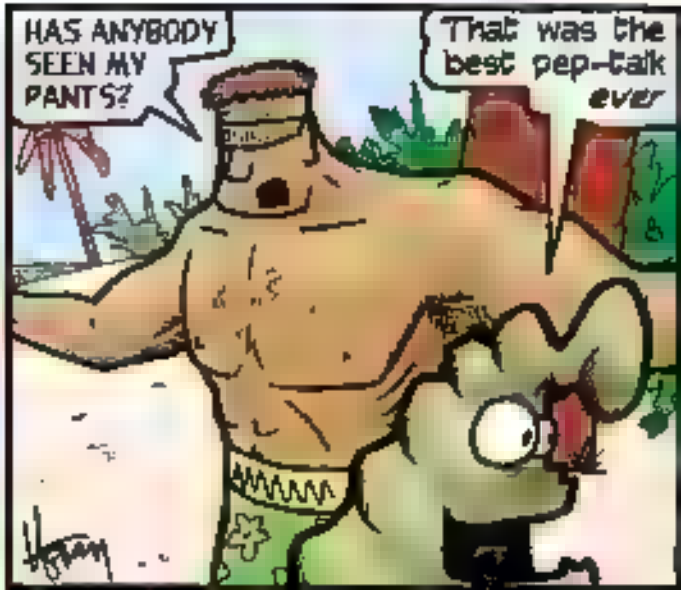
Schlock Mercenary

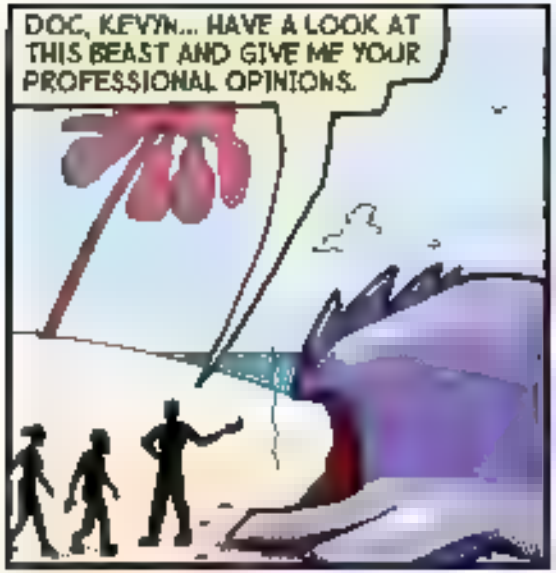
FOR A LITTLE WHILE ANYWAY...
SERGEANT, WHAT IS GOING ON HERE? WHY ARE THESE SOLDIERS OUT OF UNIFORM?
Beach party, sir. The weather is perfect
I DON'T CARE HOW NICE THE WEATHER IS! LISTEN UP! THE ARMOR IN YOUR UNIFORMS MAY BE ALL THAT SAVES YOU FROM BECOMING LUNCH FOR SOME BEACH-MONSTER!
WE HAVE NO IDEA WHA... HUHH?
KA-CHOMP


ULP?

BLAM
BLAM
BLAM

OKAY WHERE WAS I?


HAS ANYBODY SEEN MY PANTS?
That was the best pep-talk ever


DOC, KEVYN... HAVE A LOOK AT THIS BEAST AND GIVE ME YOUR PROFESSIONAL OPINIONS.

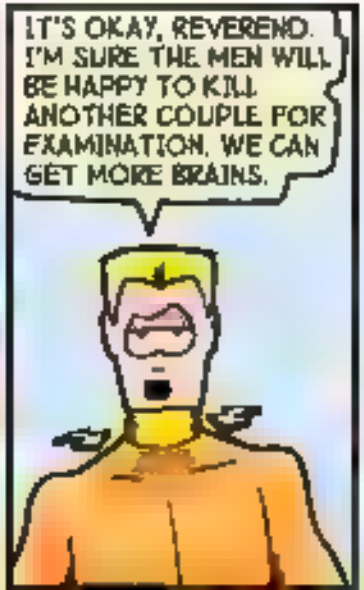
HMMM... I THINK YOU NEED A XENOBIOLOGIST INSTEAD OF A TINKERING PHYSICIST
I THINK IT'S TOO LATE FOR A DOCTOR, BUT YOU MIGHT TRY CALLING THE CHEF

I THINK WE'RE GOING TO NEED MORE SALT

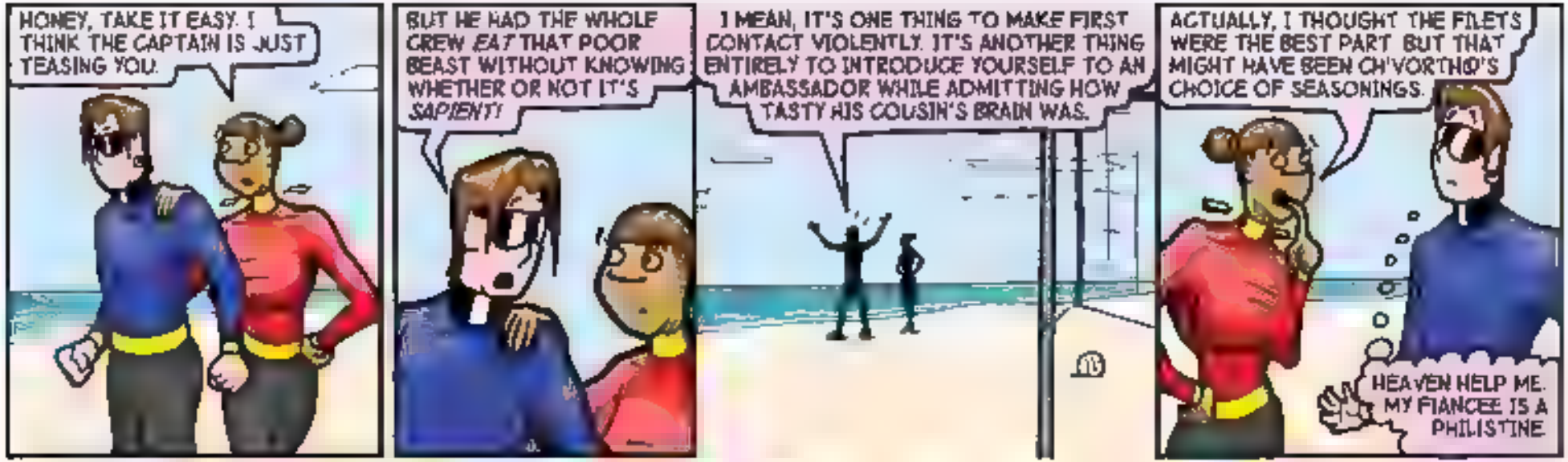
CAPTAIN, WE HAVE A MORAL DILEMMA HERE! WE HAVE TO BEGIN RESEARCH IMMEDIATELY TO DETERMINE WHETHER OR NOT THIS CREATURE YOU KILLED WAS SAPIENT!
REVEREND, WE'LL DO THE RESEARCH, BUT IT'S NOT OUR IMMEDIATE CONCERN.
BUT THIS CREATURE... DON'T YOU CARE WHETHER OR NOT IT HAD AN IMMORTAL SOUL?
SURE, BUT I'D PREFER TO FIND OUT AFTER I'M DONE EATING IT
Mmmm... this brain is the size of a pot roast, only tender!

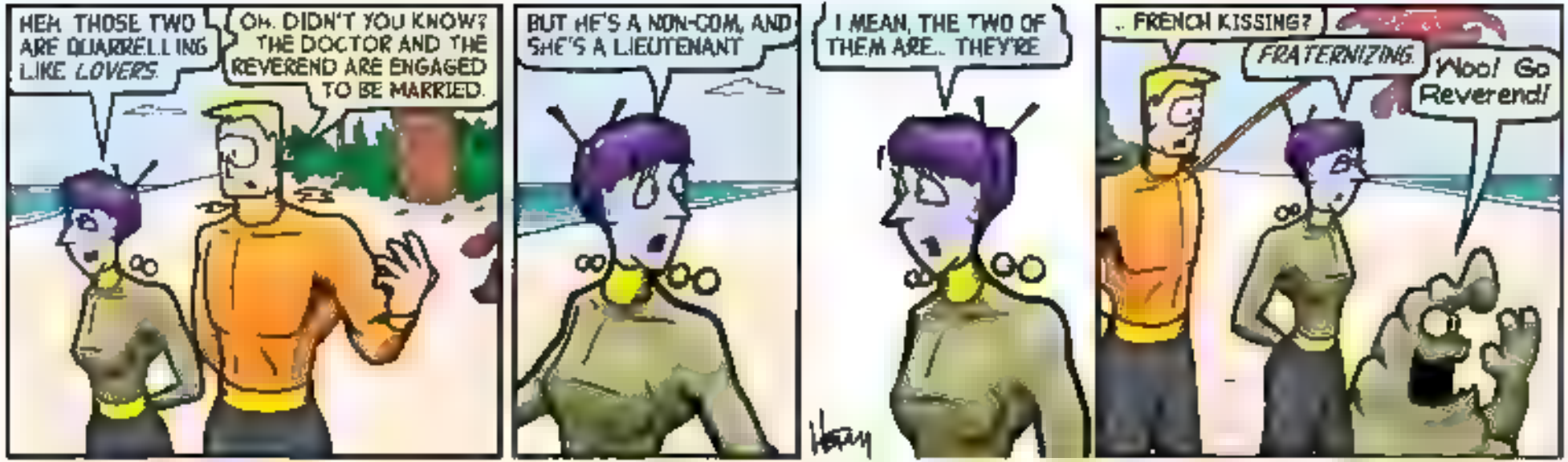
CAPTAIN, IF WE'RE GOING TO DETERMINE THE INTELLIGENCE OF THIS CREATURE, WE NEED TO EXAMINE THE BRAIN

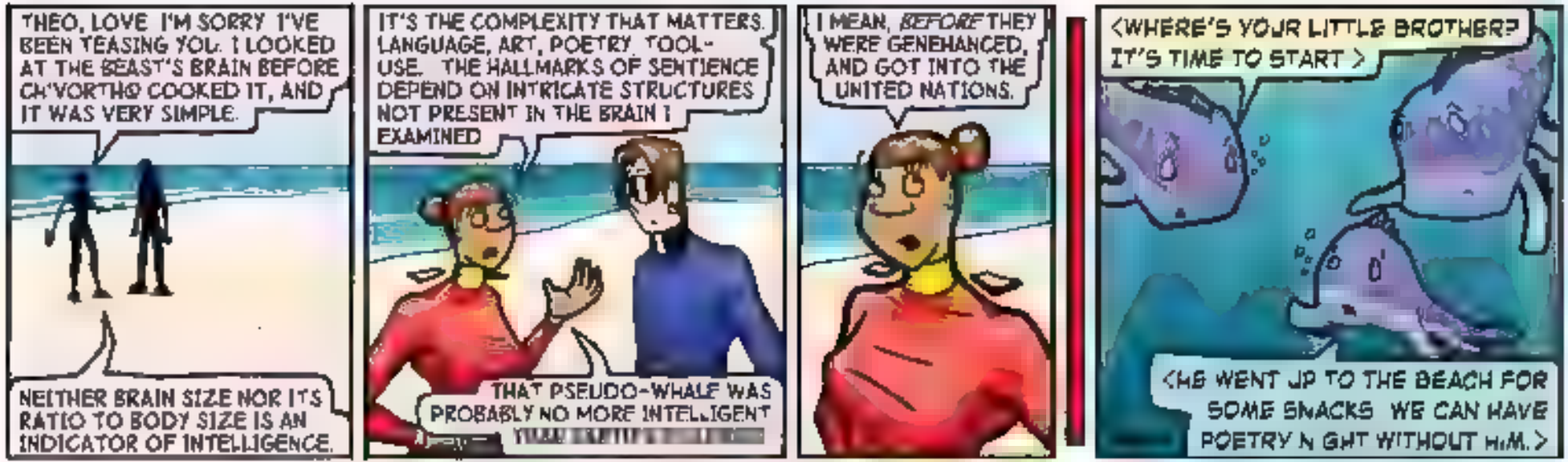
SCHLOCK ATE IT
I *KNOW* THAT I WATCHED IT HAPPEN. THAT'S WHAT I WAS TRYING TO *PREVENT*

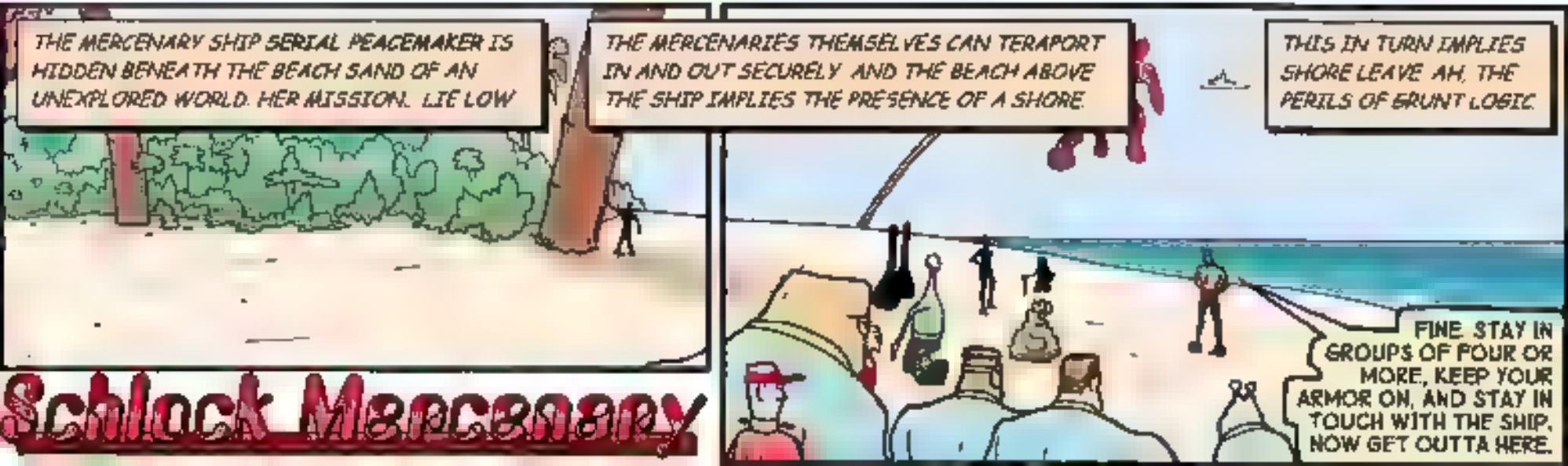

IT'S OKAY, REVEREND. I'M SURE THE MEN WILL BE HAPPY TO KILL ANOTHER COUPLE FOR EXAMINATION. WE CAN GET MORE BRAINS.

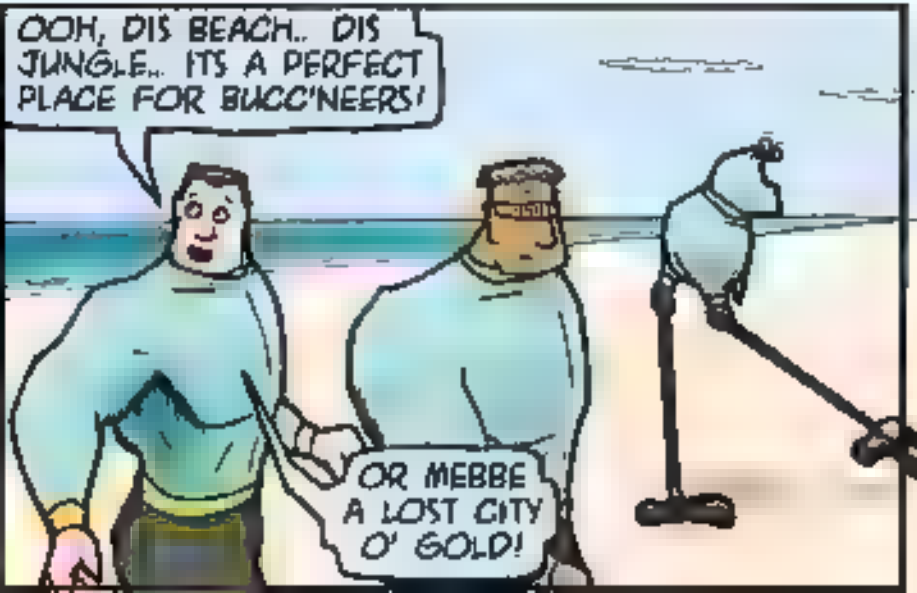
Oh, good. The brain was the best part!
FORGIVE THEM LORD, 'CAUSE I'M *POSITIVE* THEY KNOW NOT WHAT THEY DO


HONEY, TAKE IT EASY. I THINK THE CAPTAIN IS JUST TEASING YOU.
BUT HE HAD THE WHOLE CREW *EAT* THAT POOR BEAST WITHOUT KNOWING WHETHER OR NOT IT'S *SAPIENT!*
I MEAN, IT'S ONE THING TO MAKE FIRST CONTACT VIOLENTLY. IT'S ANOTHER THING ENTIRELY TO INTRODUCE YOURSELF TO AN AMBASSADOR WHILE ADMITTING HOW TASTY HIS COUSIN'S BRAIN WAS.
ACTUALLY, I THOUGHT THE FILETS WERE THE BEST PART. BUT THAT MIGHT HAVE BEEN CH'VORTHO'S CHOICE OF SEASONINGS.
HEAVEN HELP ME. MY FIANCEE IS A PHILISTINE.

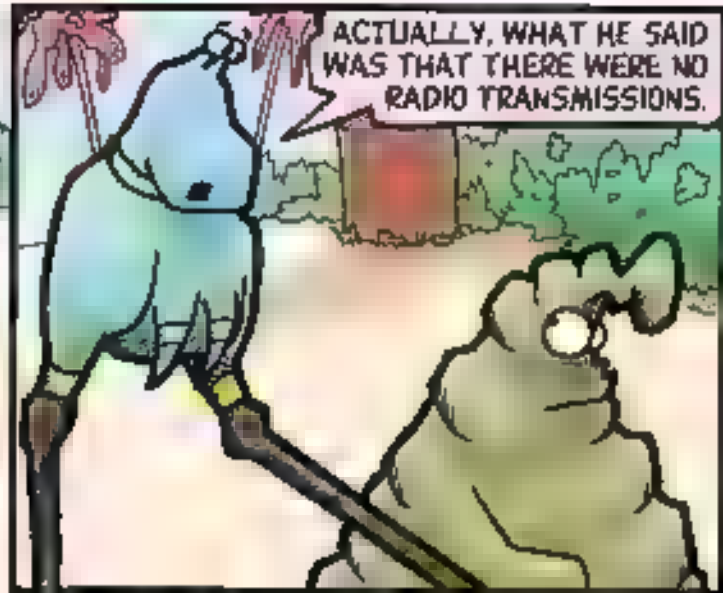

HEH. THOSE TWO ARE QUARRELLING LIKE LOVERS.
OH. DIDN'T YOU KNOW? THE DOCTOR AND THE REVEREND ARE ENGAGED TO BE MARRIED.
BUT HE'S A NON-COM, AND SHE'S A LIEUTENANT
I MEAN, THE TWO OF THEM ARE.. THEY'RE
.. FRENCH KISSING?
FRATERNIZING.
Woo! Go Reverend!

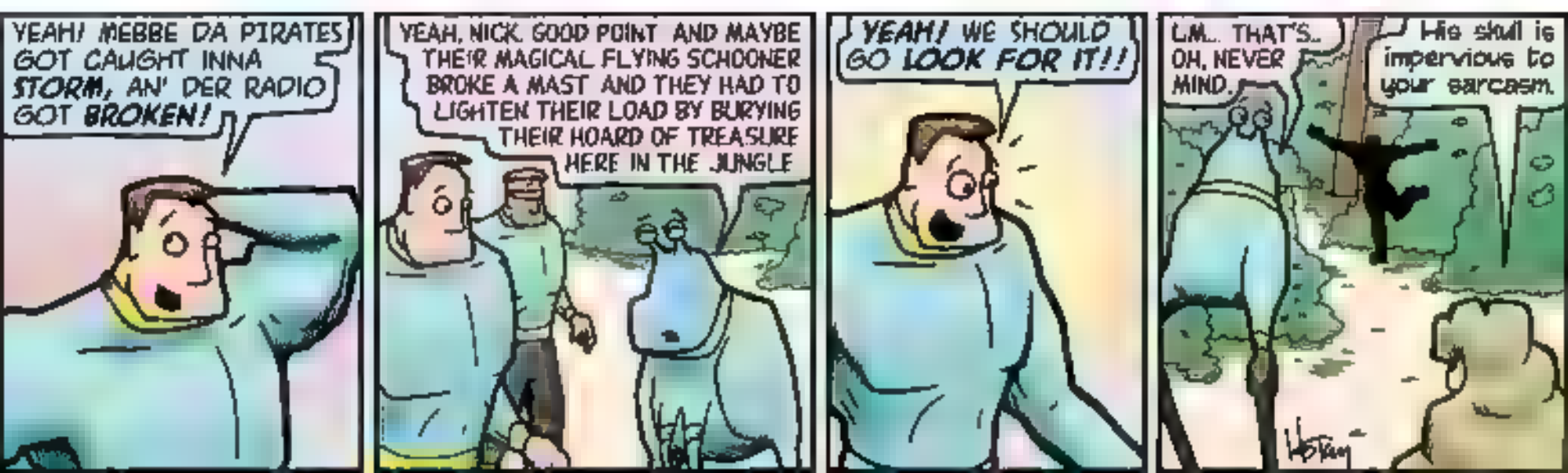

THEO, LOVE I'M SORRY I'VE BEEN TEASING YOU. I LOOKED AT THE BEAST'S BRAIN BEFORE CH'VORTHO COOKED IT, AND IT WAS VERY SIMPLE.
NEITHER BRAIN SIZE NOR ITS RATIO TO BODY SIZE IS AN INDICATOR OF INTELLIGENCE.
IT'S THE COMPLEXITY THAT MATTERS. LANGUAGE, ART, POETRY, TOOL-USE. THE HALLMARKS OF SENTIENCE DEPEND ON INTRICATE STRUCTURES NOT PRESENT IN THE BRAIN I EXAMINED.
THAT PSEUDO-WHALE WAS PROBABLY NO MORE INTELLIGENT
I MEAN, *BEFORE* THEY WERE GENEHANCED, AND GOT INTO THE UNITED NATIONS.
<WHERE'S YOUR LITTLE BROTHER? IT'S TIME TO START >
<HE WENT UP TO THE BEACH FOR SOME SNACKS. WE CAN HAVE POETRY N GHT WITHOUT HIM.>

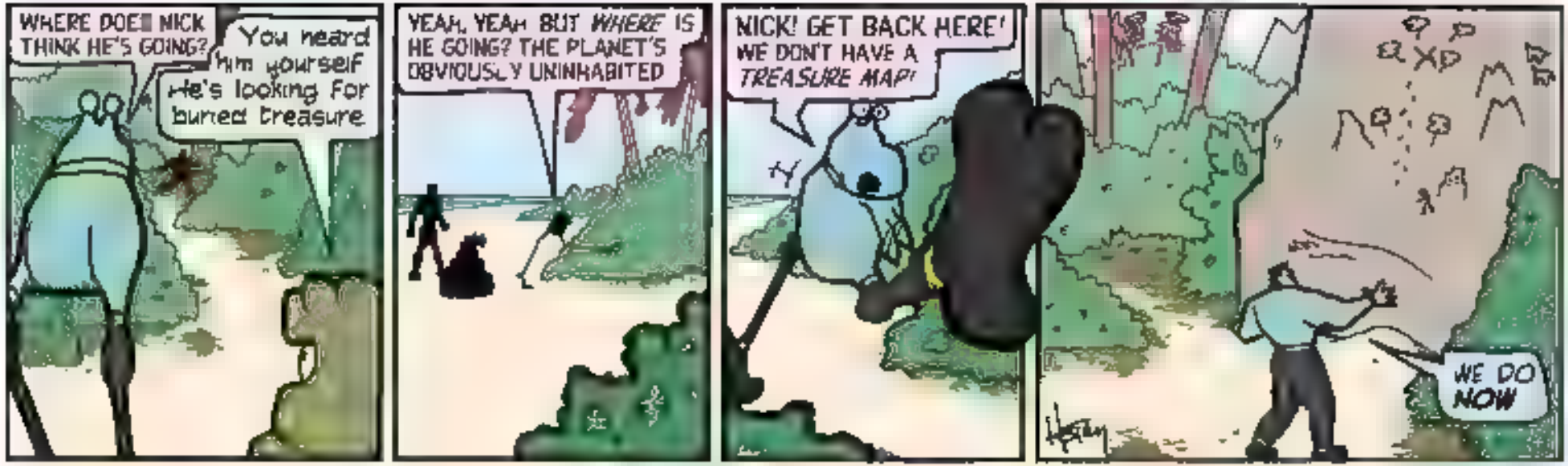

THE MERCENARY SHIP SERIAL PEACEMAKER IS HIDDEN BENEATH THE BEACH SAND OF AN UNEXPLORED WORLD. HER MISSION. LIE LOW
THE MERCENARIES THEMSELVES CAN TERAPORT IN AND OUT SECURELY AND THE BEACH ABOVE THE SHIP IMPLIES THE PRESENCE OF A SHORE.
THIS IN TURN IMPLIES SHORE LEAVE AH, THE PERILS OF GRUNT LOGIC.
FINE. STAY IN GROUPS OF FOUR OR MORE, KEEP YOUR ARMOR ON, AND STAY IN TOUCH WITH THE SHIP. NOW GET OUTTA HERE.
Schlock Mercenary

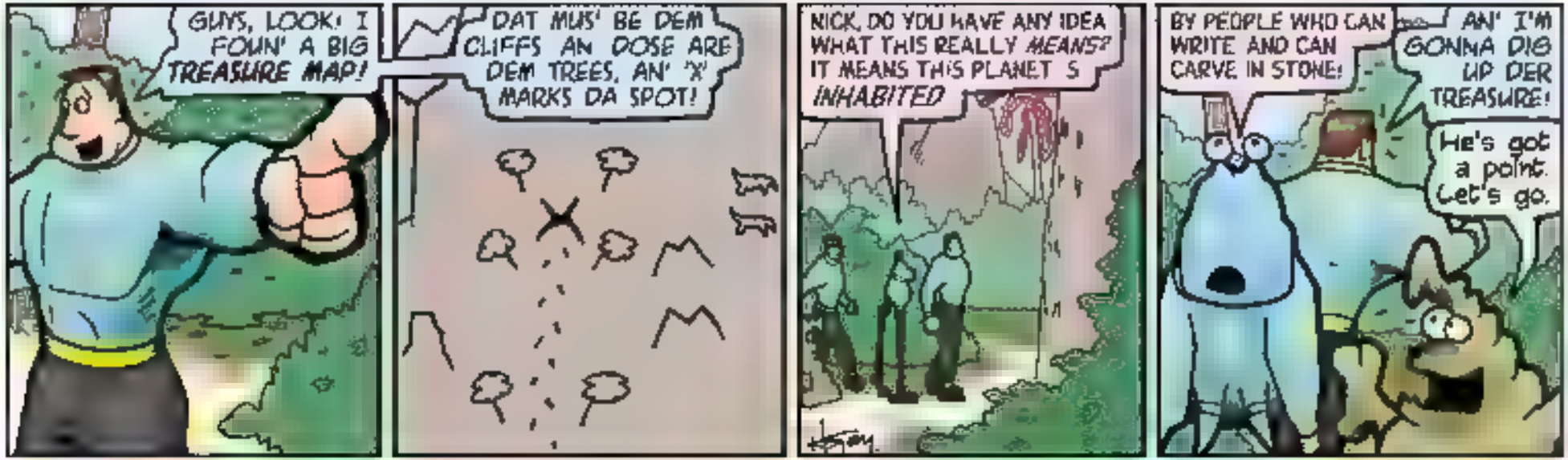

OOH, DIS BEACH.. DIS JUNGLE.. ITS A PERFECT PLACE FOR BUCC'NEERS!
OR MEBBE A LOST CITY O' GOLD!

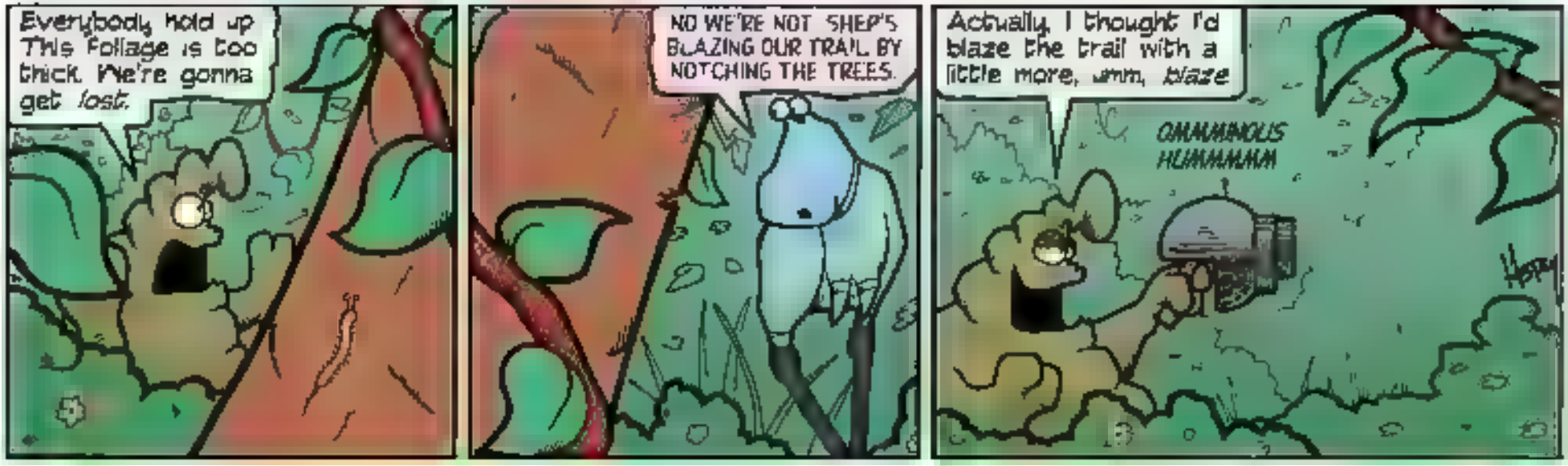
Nick, Ennesby said there was no sign of intelligent life on this planet.

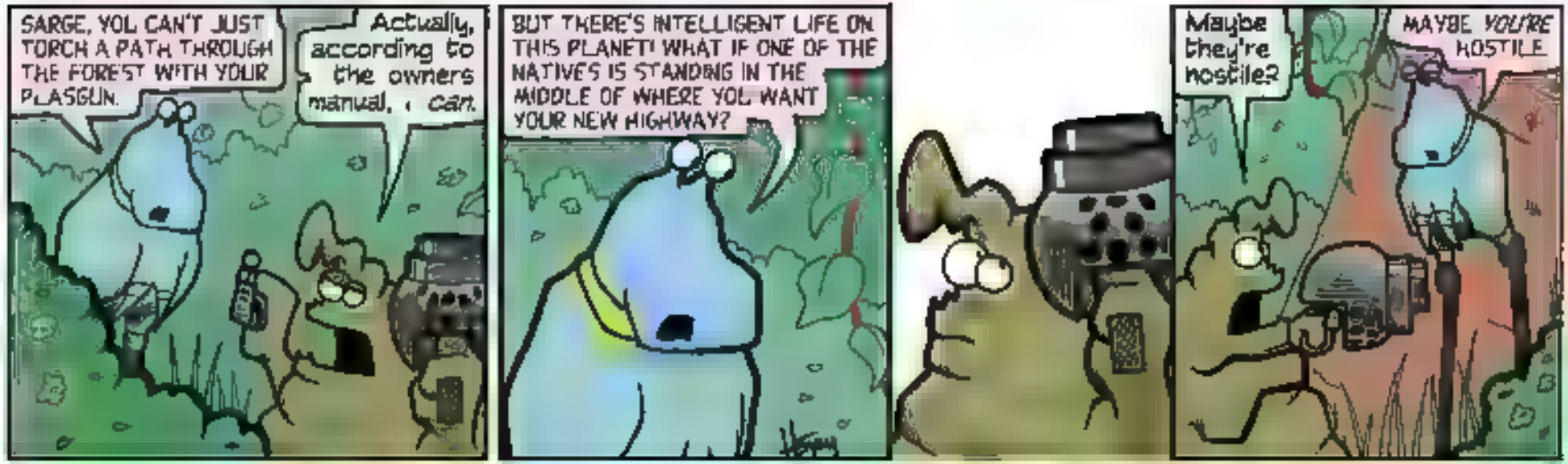

ACTUALLY, WHAT HE SAID WAS THAT THERE WERE NO RADIO TRANSMISSIONS.

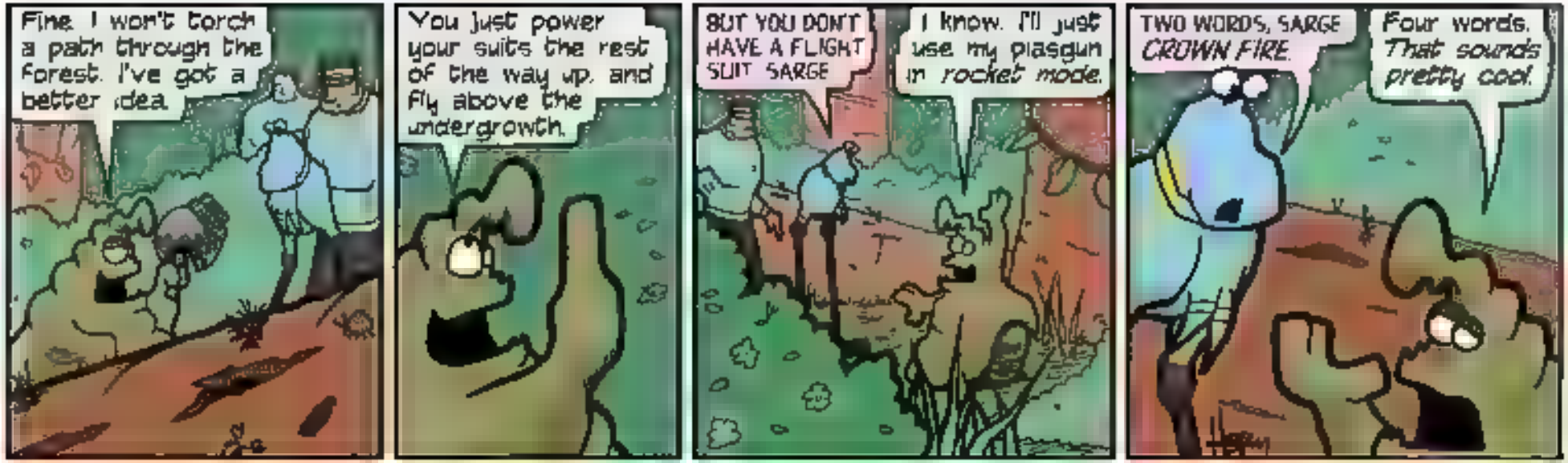

YEAH! MEBBE DA PIRATES GOT CAUGHT INNA STORM, AN' DER RADIO GOT BROKEN!
YEAH, NICK. GOOD POINT AND MAYBE THEIR MAGICAL FLYING SCHOONER BROKE A MAST AND THEY HAD TO LIGHTEN THEIR LOAD BY BURYING THEIR HOARD OF TREASURE HERE IN THE JUNGLE
YEAH! WE SHOULD GO LOOK FOR IT!!
UM... THAT'S... OH, NEVER MIND.
His skull is impervious to your sarcasm.


WHERE DOES NICK THINK HE'S GOING?
You heard him yourself He's looking for buried treasure
YEAH, YEAH BUT WHERE IS HE GOING? THE PLANET'S OBVIOUSLY UNINHABITED
NICK! GET BACK HERE! WE DON'T HAVE A TREASURE MAP!
WE DO NOW


GUYS, LOOK! I FOUN' A BIG TREASURE MAP!
DAT MUS' BE DEM CLIFFS AN DOSE ARE DEM TREES, AN' 'X' MARKS DA SPOT!
NICK, DO YOU HAVE ANY IDEA WHAT THIS REALLY MEANS? IT MEANS THIS PLANET S INHABITED
BY PEOPLE WHO CAN WRITE AND CAN CARVE IN STONE!
AN' I'M GONNA DIG UP DER TREASURE!
He's got a point. Let's go.


Everybody hold up. This foliage is too thick. We're gonna get *lost*.
NO WE'RE NOT. SHEP'S BLAZING OUR TRAIL BY NOTCHING THE TREES.
Actually, I thought I'd blaze the trail with a little more, umm, *blaze*
OMMMMOUS HUMMMMMM


SARGE, YOU CAN'T JUST TORCH A PATH THROUGH THE FOREST WITH YOUR PLASGUN.
Actually, according to the owners manual, I can.
BUT THERE'S INTELLIGENT LIFE ON THIS PLANET! WHAT IF ONE OF THE NATIVES IS STANDING IN THE MIDDLE OF WHERE YOU WANT YOUR NEW HIGHWAY?
Maybe they're hostile?
MAYBE YOU'RE HOSTILE.

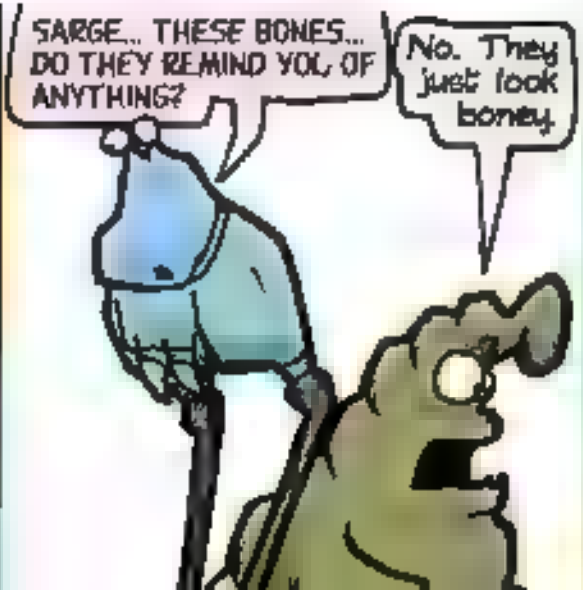

Fine. I won't torch a path through the forest. I've got a better idea.
You just power your suits the rest of the way up, and fly above the undergrowth.
BUT YOU DON'T HAVE A FLIGHT SUIT SARGE
I know. I'll just use my plasgun in *rocket mode*.
TWO WORDS, SARGE *CROWN FIRE*.
Four words. *That sounds pretty cool.*

Oooh, I've got an idea! Watch this!
WHOA HIS ARMS GOT LOOONG
I'm Tarzan, Lord of the Apes!
HE LOOKS MORE LIKE POOP-MAN, LORD OF THE FLIES

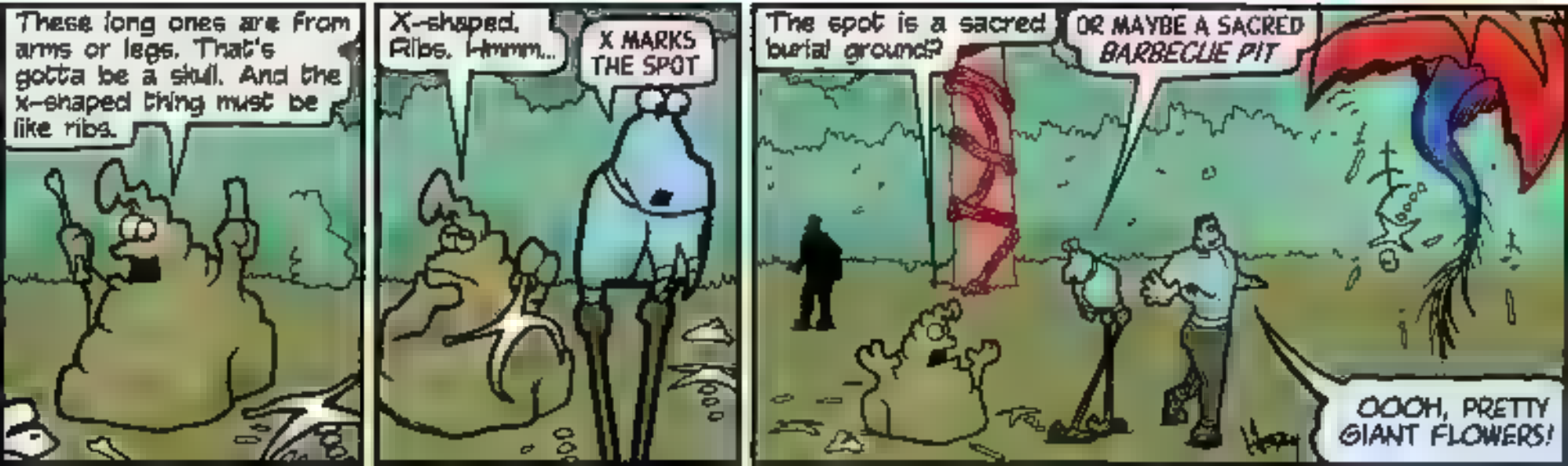
Schlock Mercenary

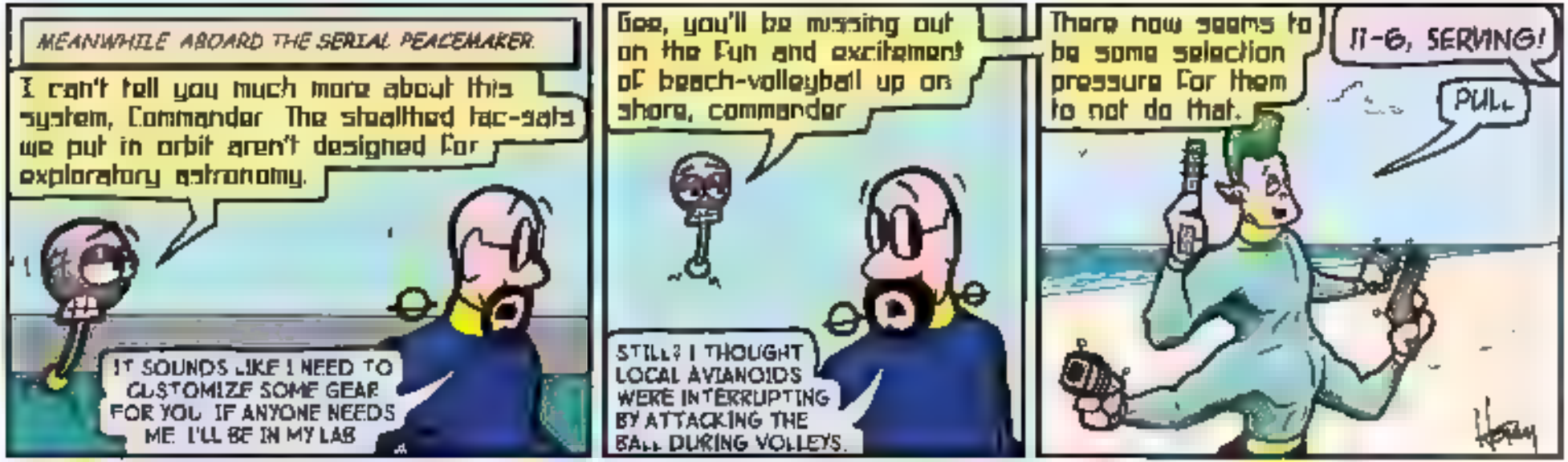
DER'S BONES EVERYWHERE DEM PIRATES MUSTA KILLED EACH OTHER OVER DA TREASURE...

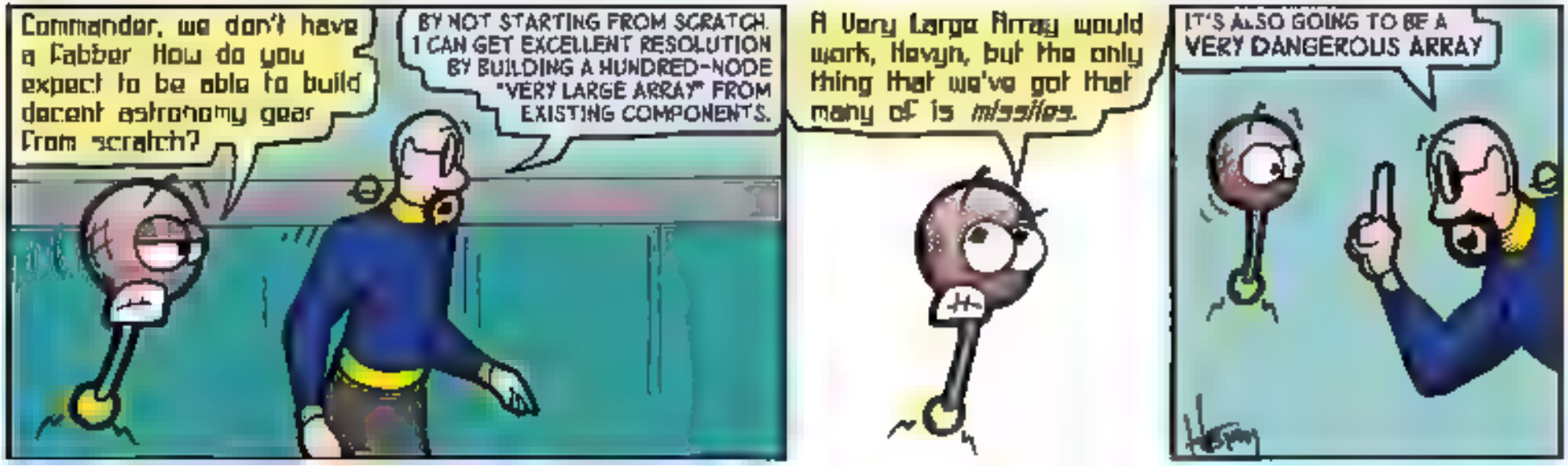
WELL, I'M GONNA START DIGGIN'

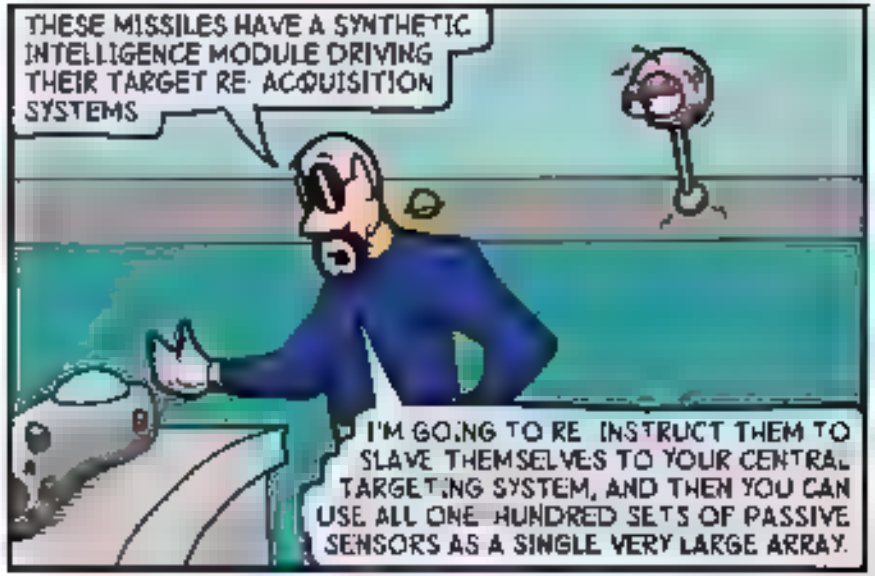

SARGE... THESE BONES... DO THEY REMIND YOU OF ANYTHING?
No. They just look boney.

Of course, just 'cause I don't have bones of my own doesn't mean I can't do some anatomy.


These long ones are from arms or legs. That's gotta be a skull. And the x-shaped thing must be like ribs.
X-shaped. Ribs. Hmmm...
X MARKS THE SPOT
The spot is a sacred burial ground?
OR MAYBE A SACRED BARBECUE PIT
OOOH, PRETTY GIANT FLOWERS!

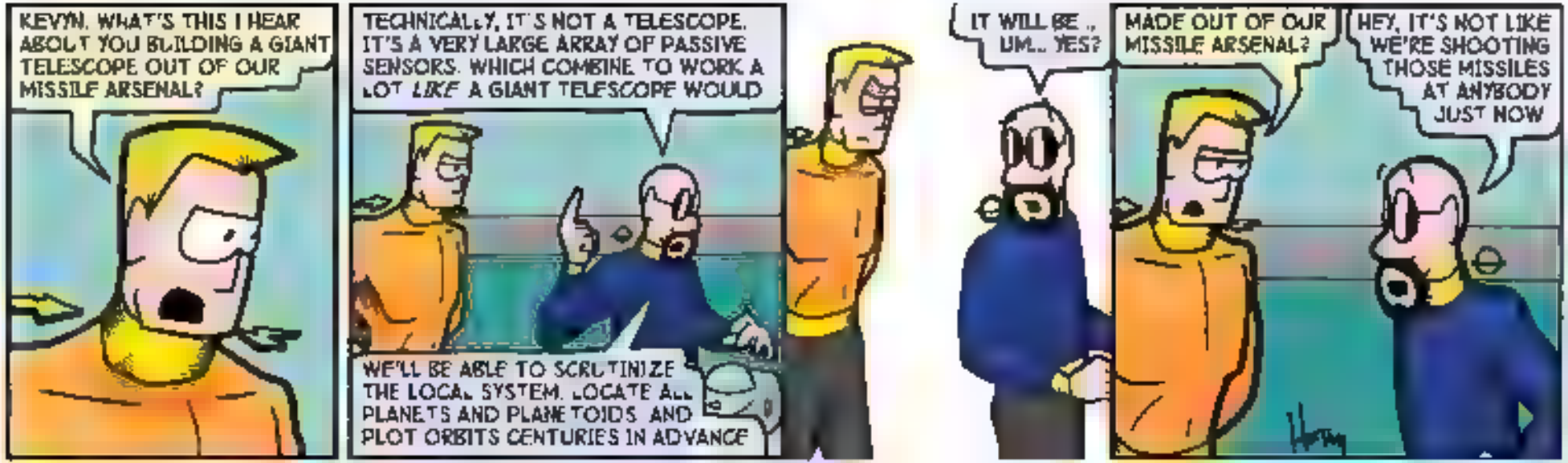

MEANWHILE ABOARD THE SERIAL PEACEMAKER.
I can't tell you much more about this system, Commander. The stealthed tac-sats we put in orbit aren't designed for exploratory astronomy.
IT SOUNDS LIKE I NEED TO CUSTOMIZE SOME GEAR FOR YOU. IF ANYONE NEEDS ME, I'LL BE IN MY LAB.
Gee, you'll be missing out on the fun and excitement of beach-volleyball up on shore, commander.
STILL? I THOUGHT LOCAL AVIANOIDS WERE INTERRUPTING BY ATTACKING THE BALL DURING VOLLEYS.
There now seems to be some selection pressure for them to not do that.
11-6, SERVING!
PULL

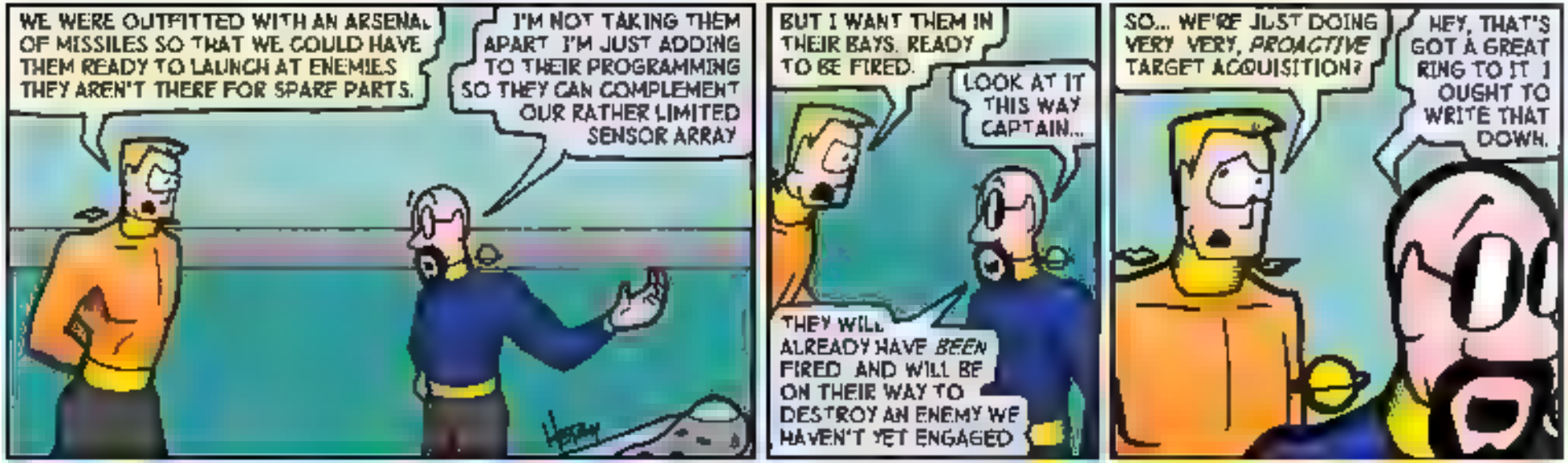

Commander, we don't have a fabber. How do you expect to be able to build decent astronomy gear from scratch?
BY NOT STARTING FROM SCRATCH. I CAN GET EXCELLENT RESOLUTION BY BUILDING A HUNDRED-NODE "VERY LARGE ARRAY" FROM EXISTING COMPONENTS.
A Very Large Array would work, Hevyn, but the only thing that we've got that many of is *missiles*.
IT'S ALSO GOING TO BE A VERY DANGEROUS ARRAY

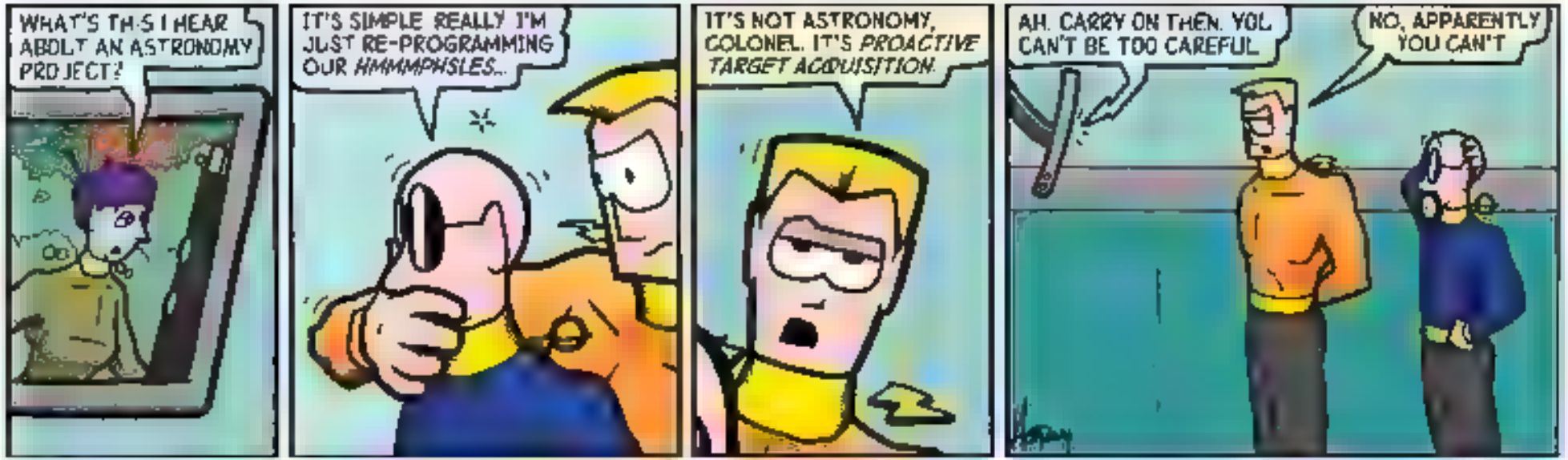

THESE MISSILES HAVE A SYNTHETIC INTELLIGENCE MODULE DRIVING THEIR TARGET RE-ACQUISITION SYSTEMS.
I'M GOING TO RE-INSTRUCT THEM TO SLAVE THEMSELVES TO YOUR CENTRAL TARGETING SYSTEM, AND THEN YOU CAN USE ALL ONE HUNDRED SETS OF PASSIVE SENSORS AS A SINGLE VERY LARGE ARRAY.

BY SPACING THE ARRAY OUT ACROSS A 200-MILLION-KLICK ORBIT YOU'LL HAVE FANTASTIC RESOLUTION.

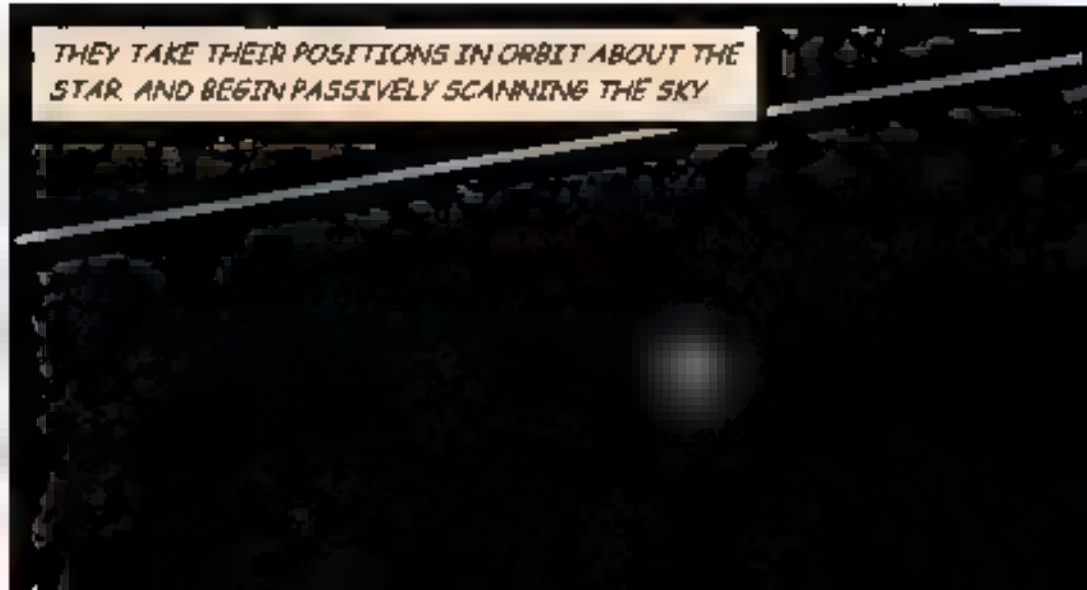
I'll also have empty missile bays.
AND FANTASTIC RESOLUTION.


KEVYN, WHAT'S THIS I HEAR ABOUT YOU BUILDING A GIANT TELESCOPE OUT OF OUR MISSILE ARSENAL?
TECHNICALLY, IT'S NOT A TELESCOPE. IT'S A VERY LARGE ARRAY OF PASSIVE SENSORS. WHICH COMBINE TO WORK A LOT *LIKE* A GIANT TELESCOPE WOULD
WE'LL BE ABLE TO SCRUTINIZE THE LOCAL SYSTEM, LOCATE ALL PLANETS AND PLANETOIDS AND PLOT ORBITS CENTURIES IN ADVANCE
IT WILL BE ... UM... YES?
MADE OUT OF OUR MISSILE ARSENAL?
HEY, IT'S NOT LIKE WE'RE SHOOTING THOSE MISSILES AT ANYBODY JUST NOW


WE WERE OUTFITTED WITH AN ARSENAL OF MISSILES SO THAT WE COULD HAVE THEM READY TO LAUNCH AT ENEMIES THEY AREN'T THERE FOR SPARE PARTS.
I'M NOT TAKING THEM APART I'M JUST ADDING TO THEIR PROGRAMMING SO THEY CAN COMPLEMENT OUR RATHER LIMITED SENSOR ARRAY
BUT I WANT THEM IN THEIR BAYS. READY TO BE FIRED.
LOOK AT IT THIS WAY CAPTAIN...
THEY WILL ALREADY HAVE *BEEN* FIRED AND WILL BE ON THEIR WAY TO DESTROY AN ENEMY WE HAVEN'T YET ENGAGED
SO... WE'RE JUST DOING VERY VERY, *PROACTIVE* TARGET ACQUISITION?
HEY, THAT'S GOT A GREAT RING TO IT I OUGHT TO WRITE THAT DOWN.

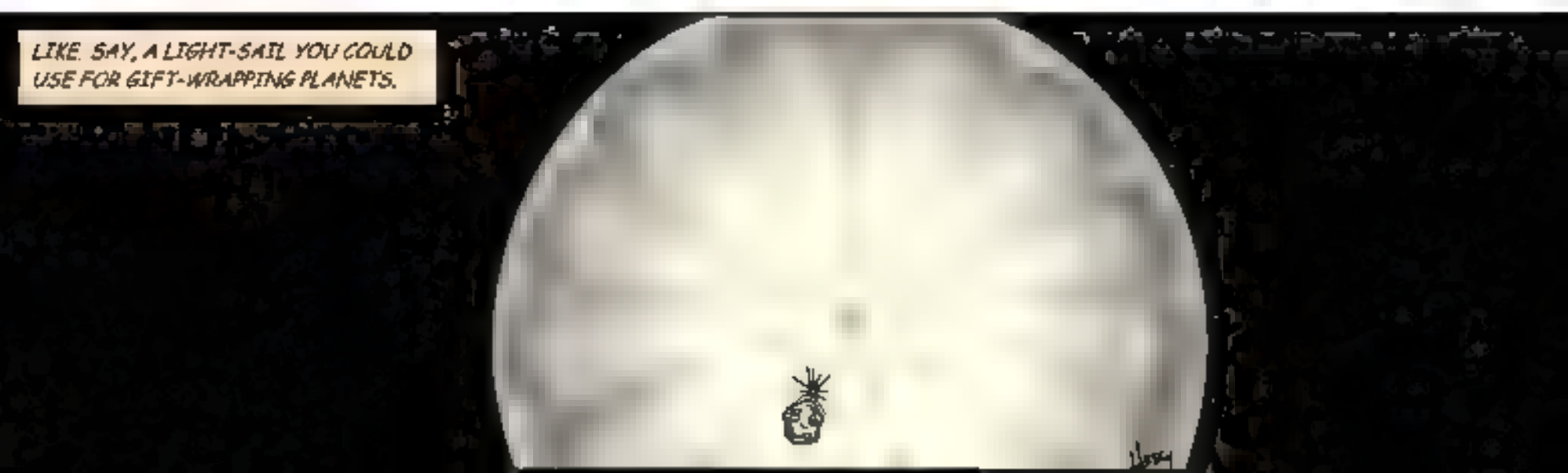

WHAT'S THIS I HEAR ABOUT AN ASTRONOMY PROJECT?
IT'S SIMPLE REALLY I'M JUST RE-PROGRAMMING OUR HMMMPHSLES...
IT'S NOT ASTRONOMY, COLONEL. IT'S PROACTIVE TARGET ACQUISITION.
AH. CARRY ON THEN. YOU CAN'T BE TOO CAREFUL.
NO, APPARENTLY YOU CAN'T

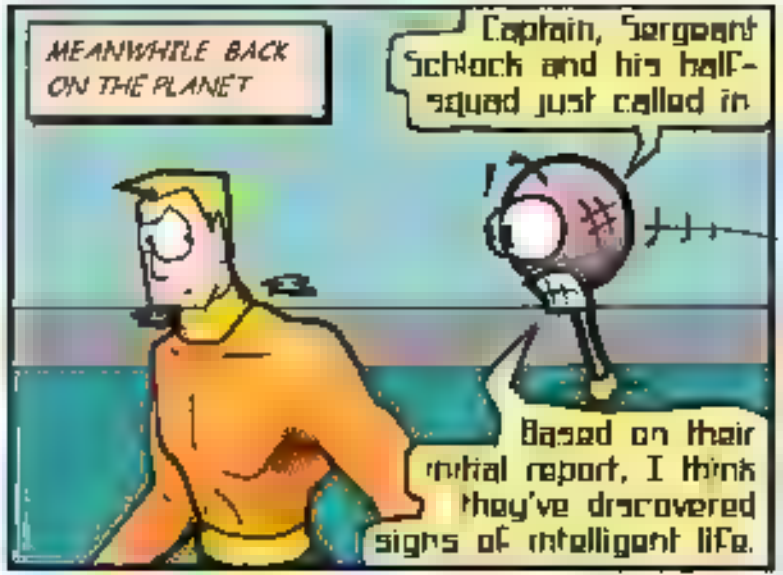
Schlock Mercenary



INDIVIDUALLY, THEY PROVIDE POOR RESOLUTION, BUT WHEN THEIR INPUTS ARE COMBINED IN AN ARRAY THE PICTURE IS QUITE CLEAR. ANY OBJECT OF NOTE WITHIN SEVERAL LIGHT-YEARS CAN BE BROUGHT UNDER SIGNIFICANT SCRUTINY.

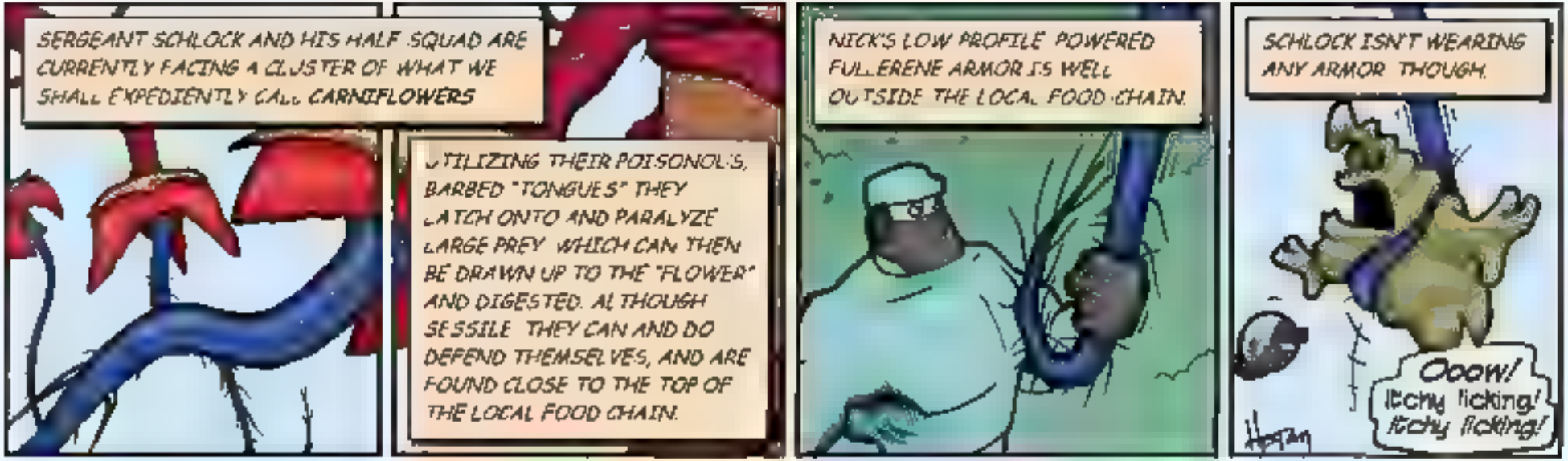
OF COURSE, THERE'S AN AWFUL LOT OF SKY TO SCRUTINIZE. WHICH MEANS THAT IT'S POSSIBLE TO MISS THINGS... EVEN VERY BIG THINGS.


LIKE SAY, A LIGHT-SAIL YOU COULD USE FOR GIFT-WRAPPING PLANETS.


MEANWHILE BACK ON THE PLANET
Captain, Sergeant Schlock and his half-squad just called in
Based on their initial report, I think they've discovered signs of intelligent life.

UNNNGH... IS IT TOO MUCH TO HOPE THAT THEY HAVEN'T ALREADY STARTED SHOOTING?

BLAM
BLAM
BLAM
AAUUGH! UGLY.
Straight up! Kill it Kill it!
IN A WORD? YES

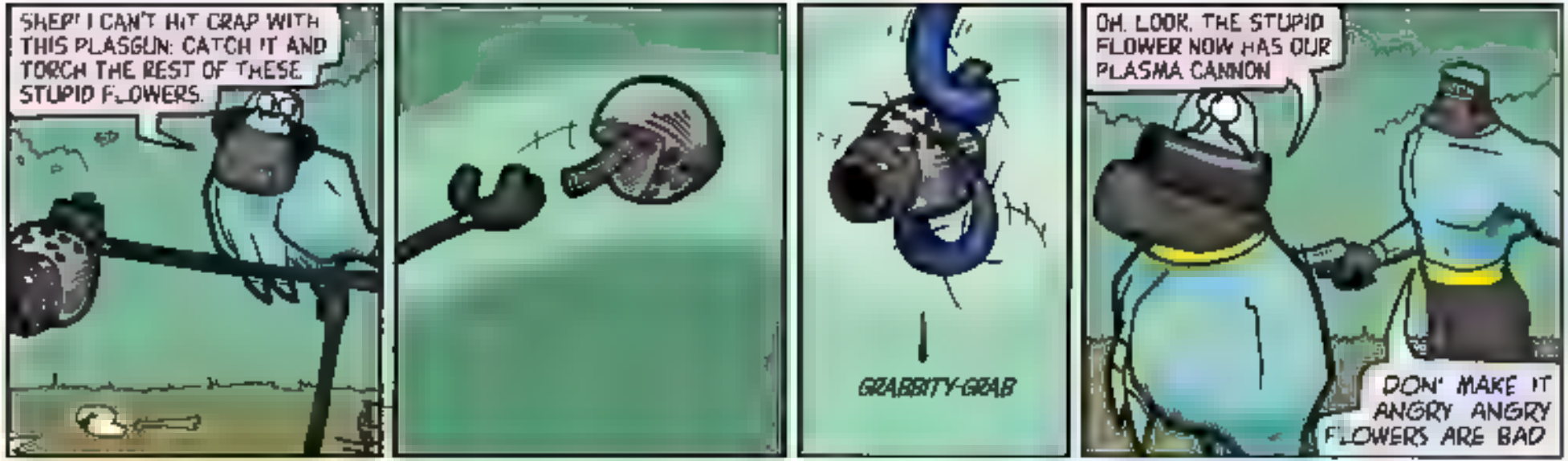

SERGEANT SCHLOCK AND HIS HALF SQUAD ARE CURRENTLY FACING A CLUSTER OF WHAT WE SHALL EXPEDIENTLY CALL CARNIFLOWERS
UTILIZING THEIR POISONOUS, BARBED "TONGUES" THEY LATCH ONTO AND PARALYZE LARGE PREY WHICH CAN THEN BE DRAWN UP TO THE "FLOWER" AND DIGESTED. ALTHOUGH SESSILE THEY CAN AND DO DEFEND THEMSELVES, AND ARE FOUND CLOSE TO THE TOP OF THE LOCAL FOOD CHAIN.
NICK'S LOW PROFILE POWERED FULLERENE ARMOR IS WELL OUTSIDE THE LOCAL FOOD CHAIN.
SCHLOCK ISN'T WEARING ANY ARMOR THOUGH.
Ooow! Itchy licking! Itchy licking!

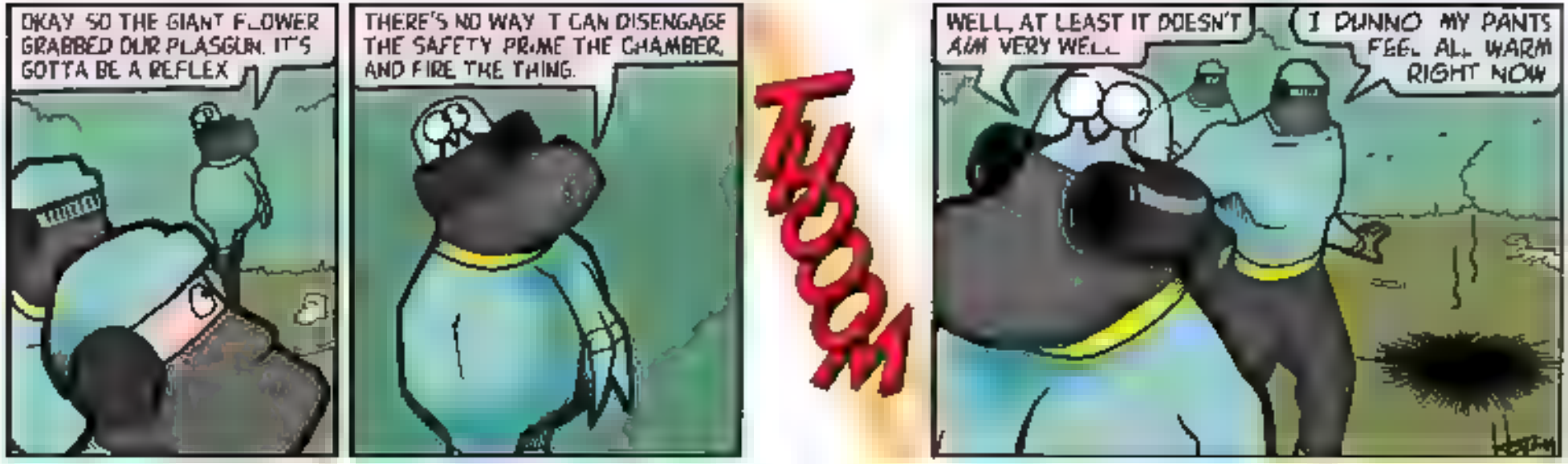
NICK THAT FLOWER ATE SERGEANT SCHLOCK! SHOOT IT DOWN!

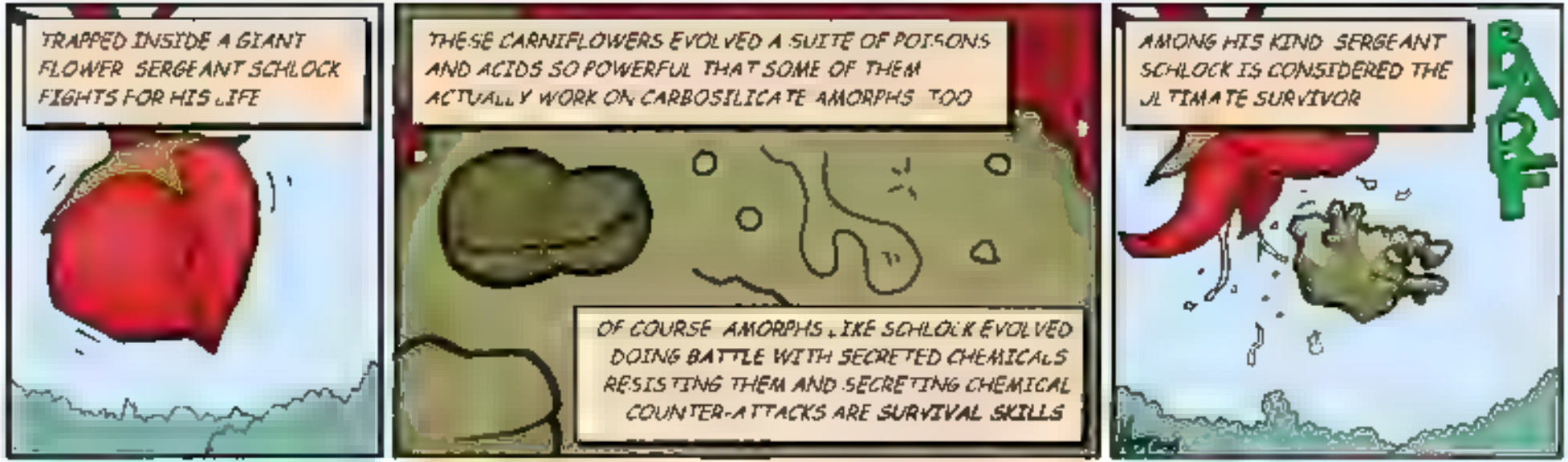
RELAX, LEGS. DA SARGE'LL BLAST HIS WAY OUTTA DAT FLOWER WHEN HE'S GOOD AND READY

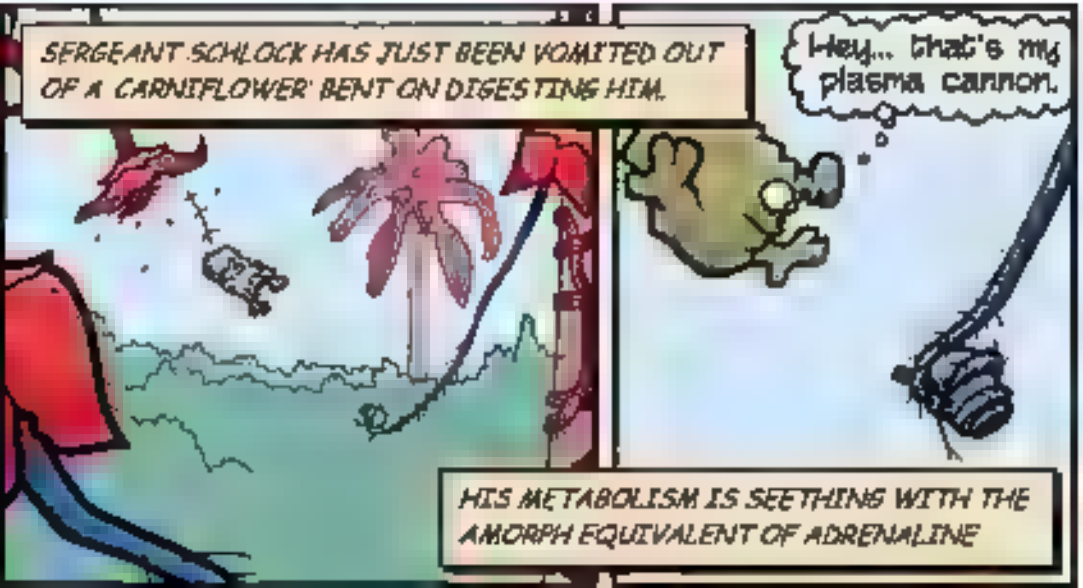
OH, THAT'S RIGHT HE'LL JUST USE THIS PLASGUN OF HIS SILLY ME

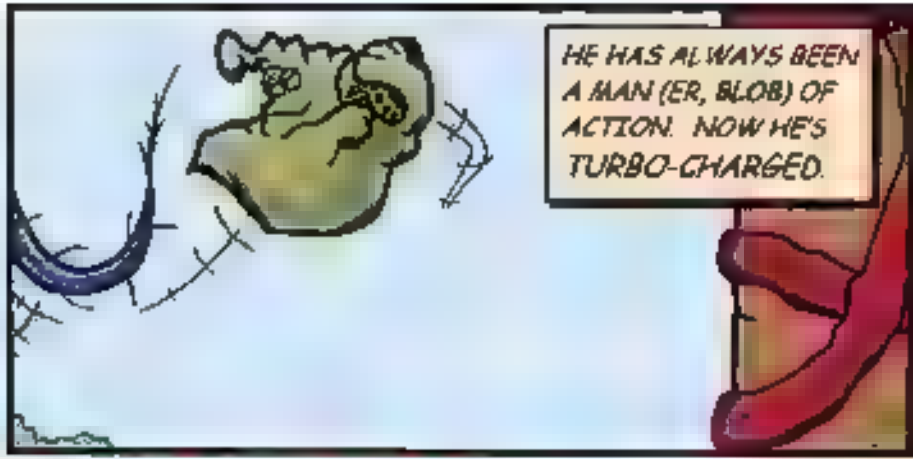
YEAH HE'S A MEAN SHOT WIT' DAT THING
I SEE THAT YOUR BRAIN WAS BUILT BY THE LOWEST BIDDER


SHEP! I CAN'T HIT CRAP WITH THIS PLASGUN: CATCH IT AND TORCH THE REST OF THESE STUPID FLOWERS.
GRABBITY-GRAB
OH. LOOK. THE STUPID FLOWER NOW HAS OUR PLASMA CANNON
DON' MAKE IT ANGRY ANGRY FLOWERS ARE BAD

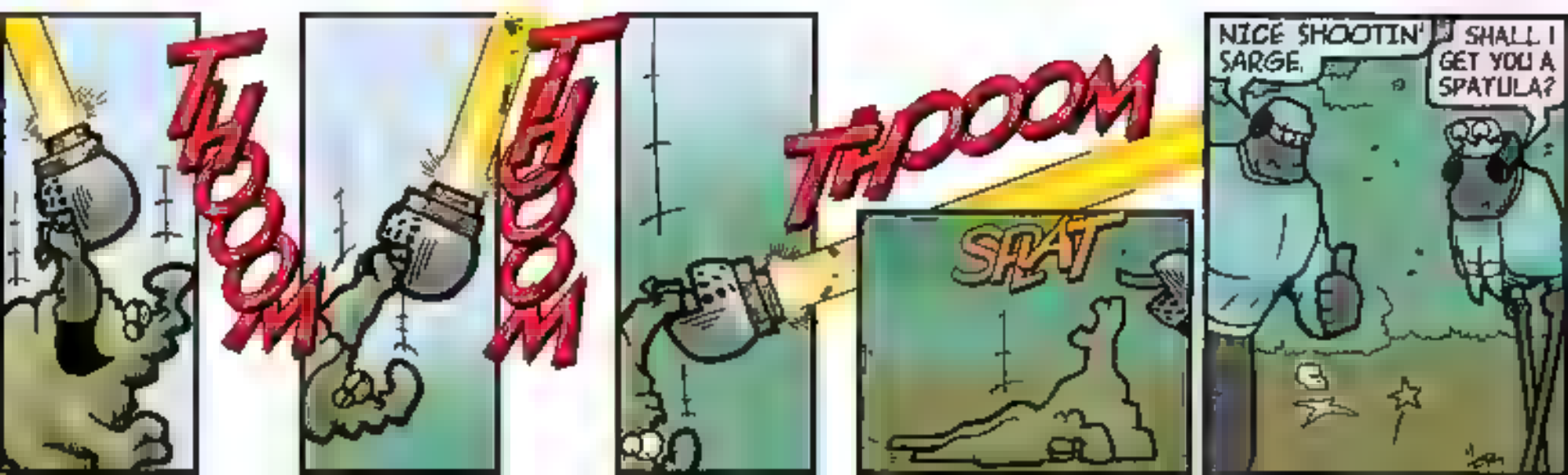

OKAY SO THE GIANT FLOWER GRABBED OUR PLASGUN. IT'S GOTTA BE A REFLEX
THERE'S NO WAY I CAN DISENGAGE THE SAFETY PRIME THE CHAMBER, AND FIRE THE THING.
TOOOM
WELL, AT LEAST IT DOESN'T AIM VERY WELL
I DUNNO MY PANTS FEEL ALL WARM RIGHT NOW

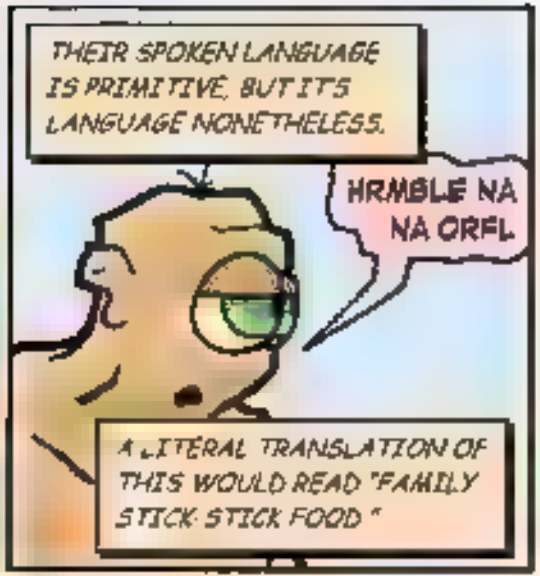

TRAPPED INSIDE A GIANT FLOWER SERGEANT SCHLOCK FIGHTS FOR HIS LIFE
THESE CARNIFLOWERS EVOLVED A SUITE OF POISONS AND ACIDS SO POWERFUL THAT SOME OF THEM ACTUALLY WORK ON CARBOSILICATE AMORPHS TOO
OF COURSE AMORPHS LIKE SCHLOCK EVOLVED DOING BATTLE WITH SECRETED CHEMICALS RESISTING THEM AND SECRETING CHEMICAL COUNTER-ATTACKS ARE SURVIVAL SKILLS
AMONG HIS KIND SERGEANT SCHLOCK IS CONSIDERED THE ULTIMATE SURVIVOR
BARF



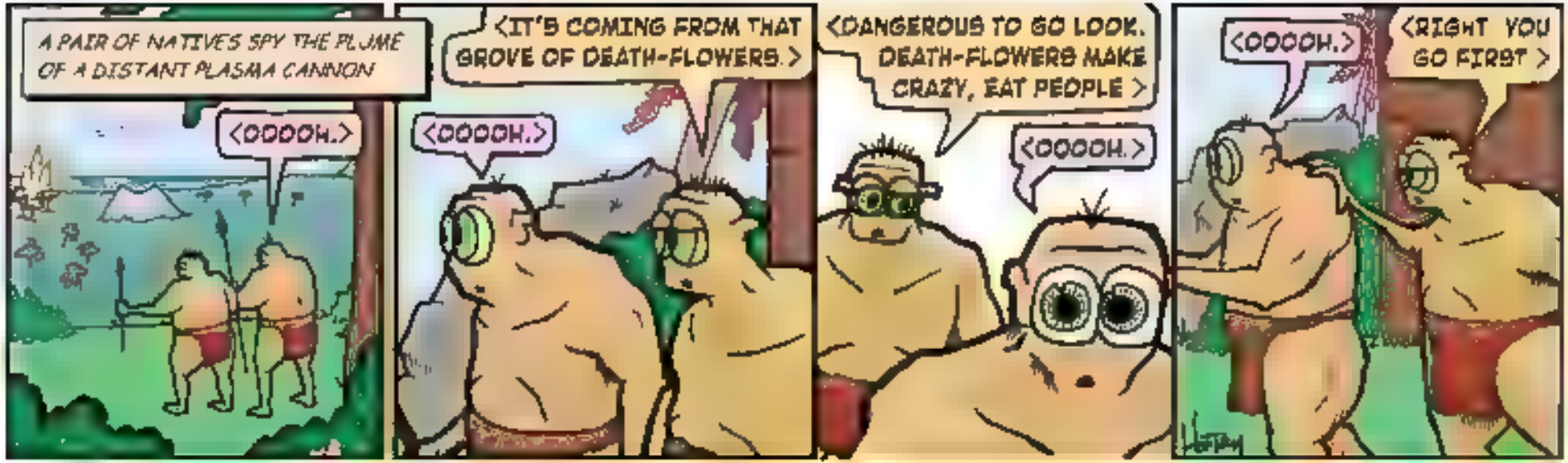


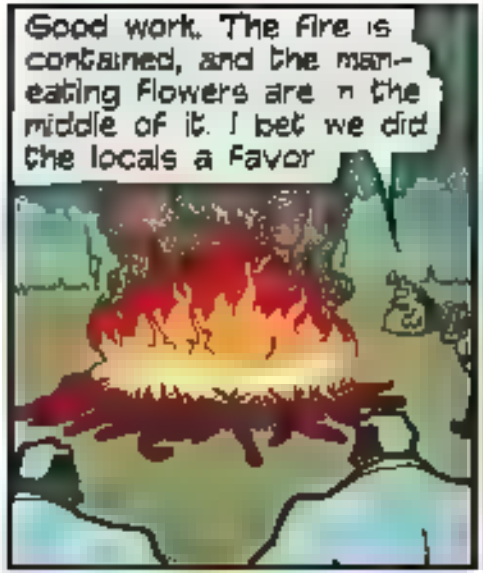
Schlock Mercenary

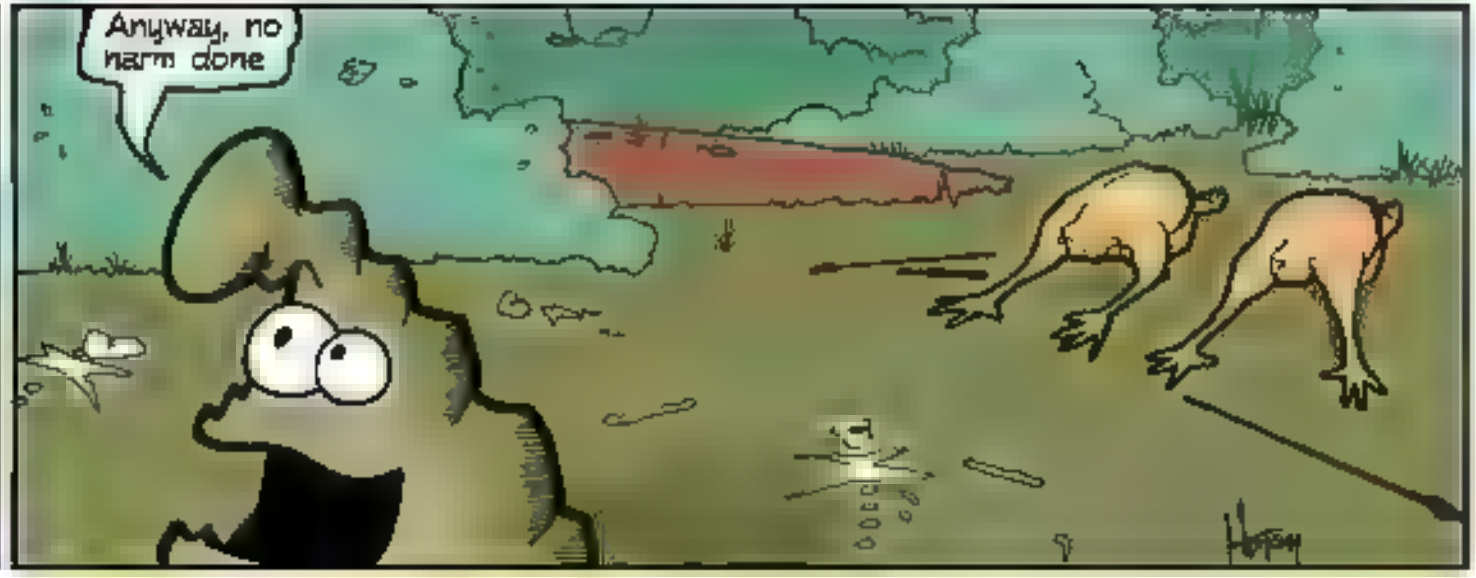

THOOM
THOOM
THOOM
SPLAT
NICE SHOOTIN' SARGE.
SHALL I GET YOU A SPATULA?

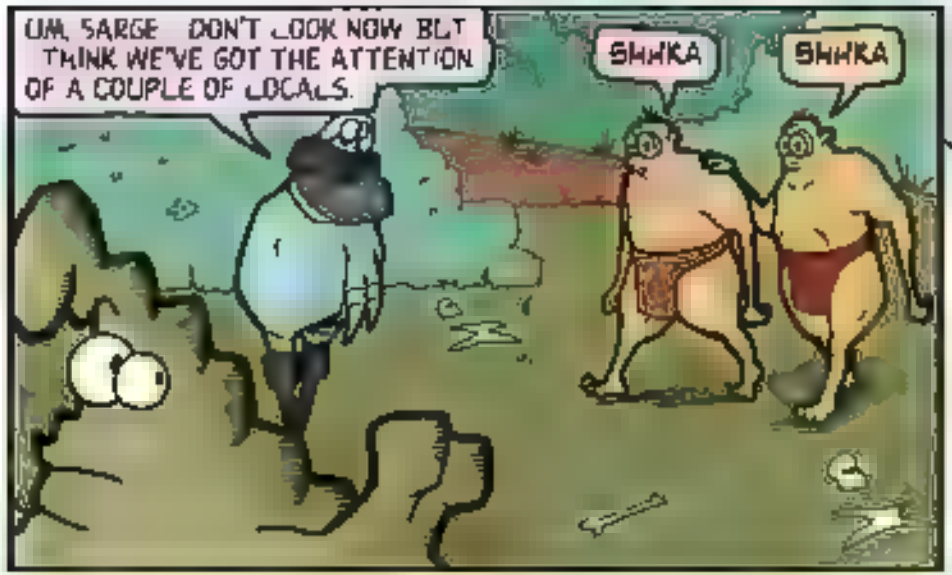


CONTEXTUALLY HOWEVER, THE MEANING IS MUCH DEEPER. FOR STARTERS, THE PITCH AT WHICH IT WAS SPOKEN INDICATES A FIRM BELIEF OR TRUTH, WHILE THE FACIAL EXPRESSION OF THE SPEAKER INSTEAD CONVEYS A FEELING OF DISBELIEF. THIS JUXTAPOSITION IS FOLLOWED BY WHAT AMOUNTS TO A LAUGH. THUS, A FULL TRANSLATION READS: "I AM SO SURE YOUR NEW ATLATL IS GOING TO FEED THE FAMILY."

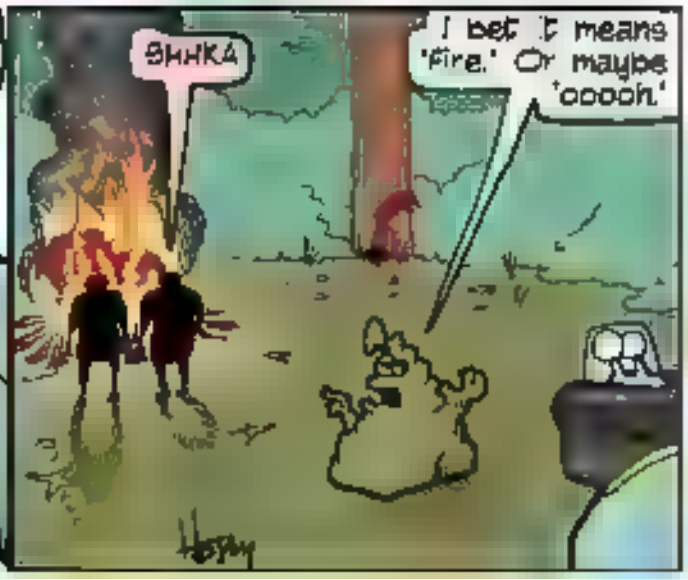

A PAIR OF NATIVES SPY THE PLUME OF A DISTANT PLASMA CANNON
<OOOOH.>
<IT'S COMING FROM THAT GROVE OF DEATH-FLOWERS.>
<OOOOH.>
<DANGEROUS TO GO LOOK. DEATH-FLOWERS MAKE CRAZY, EAT PEOPLE>
<OOOOH.>
<OOOOH.>
<RIGHT YOU GO FIRST>

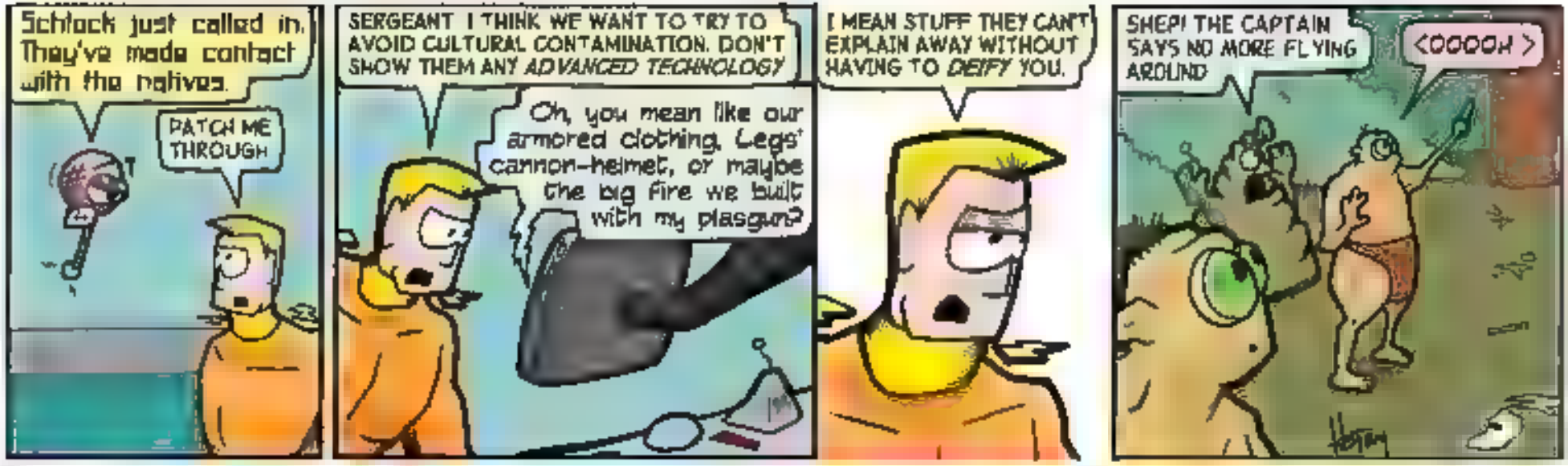

Good work. The fire is contained, and the man-eating flowers are in the middle of it. I bet we did the locals a favor


Anyway, no harm done

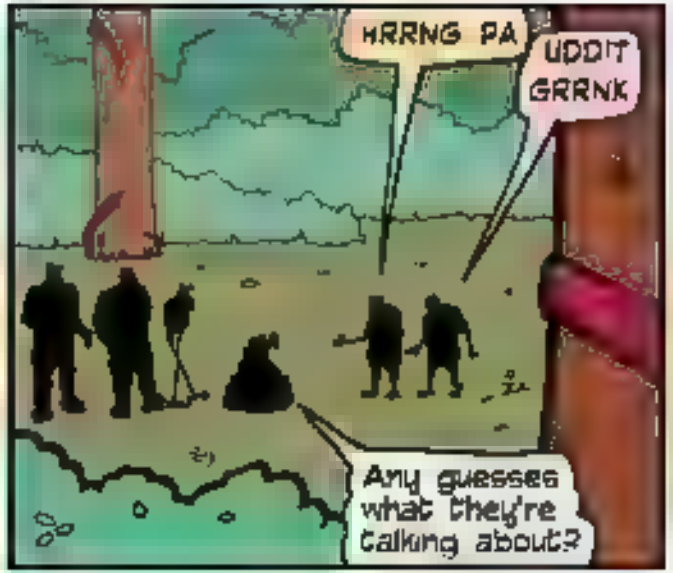

UM, SARGE... DON'T LOOK NOW BUT I THINK WE'VE GOT THE ATTENTION OF A COUPLE OF LOCALS.
SHHKA
SHHKA

SHHKA? DOES IT MEAN 'HELLO?' IS IT A NAME? A PLEA? A DIETY? WHAT?

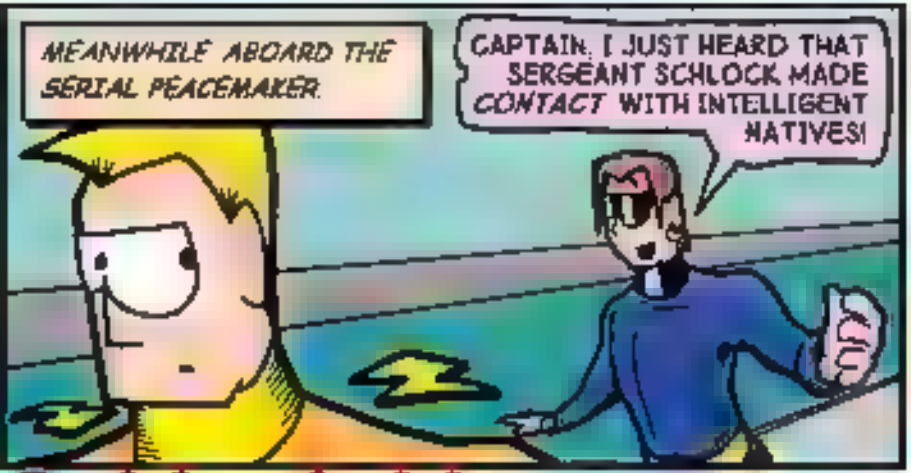

SHHKA
I bet it means 'Fire.' Or maybe 'oooohh.'


Schlock just called in. They've made contact with the natives.
PATCH ME THROUGH
SERGEANT I THINK WE WANT TO TRY TO AVOID CULTURAL CONTAMINATION. DON'T SHOW THEM ANY ADVANCED TECHNOLOGY
Oh, you mean like our armored clothing, Legs' cannon-helmet, or maybe the big fire we built with my plasgun?
I MEAN STUFF THEY CAN'T EXPLAIN AWAY WITHOUT HAVING TO DEIFY YOU.
SHEP! THE CAPTAIN SAYS NO MORE FLYING AROUND
<OOOOH>

Everybody hold still. Let the natives get a good look at us

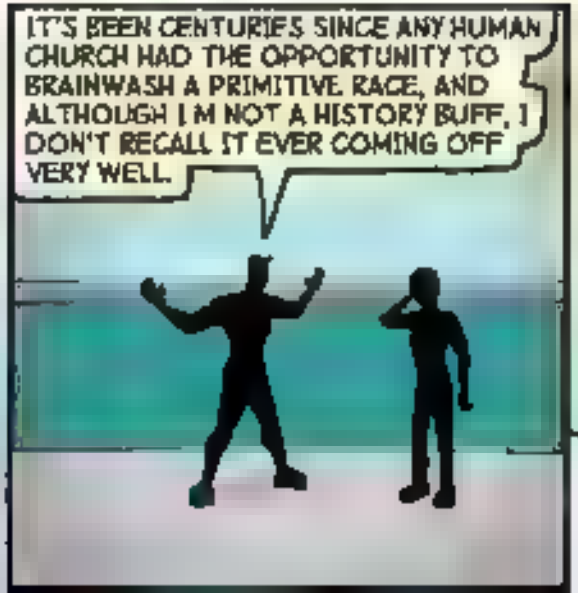

HRRNG PA
UDDIT GRRNK
Any guesses what they're talking about?

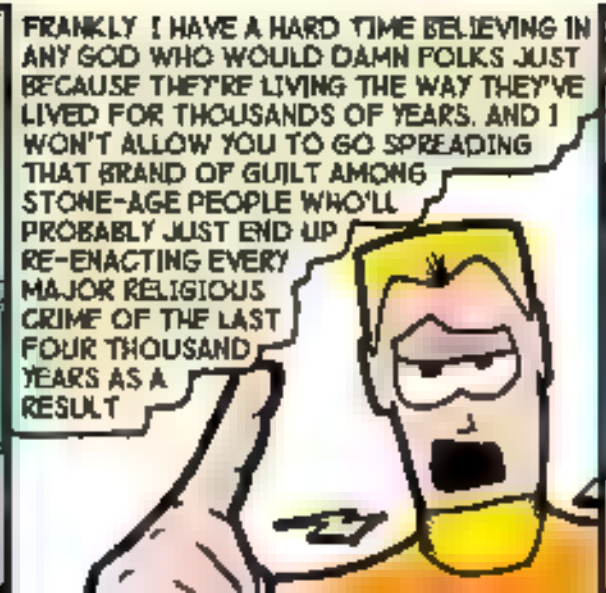
THEY'RE PROBABLY AMAZED BY OUR RICH DIVERSITY
<THEIR PACKBEAST MUST BE HUGE>
<AND VERY SICK.>

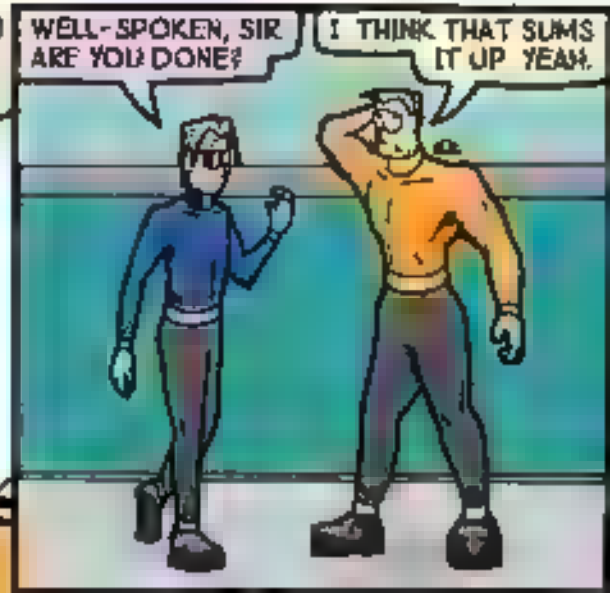


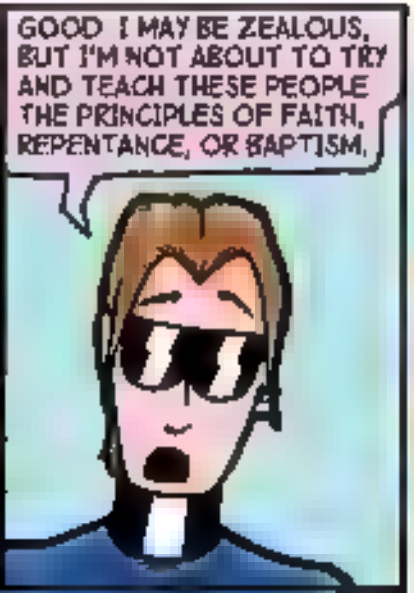
Schlock Mercenary

I THINK I NEED TO GET NEW SUNGLASSES.

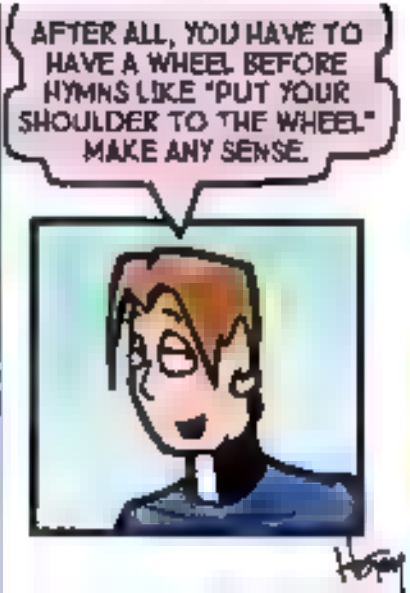

IT'S BEEN CENTURIES SINCE ANY HUMAN CHURCH HAD THE OPPORTUNITY TO BRAINWASH A PRIMITIVE RACE, AND ALTHOUGH I'M NOT A HISTORY BUFF, I DON'T RECALL IT EVER COMING OFF VERY WELL.


FRANKLY I HAVE A HARD TIME BELIEVING IN ANY GOD WHO WOULD DAMN FOLKS JUST BECAUSE THEY'RE LIVING THE WAY THEY'VE LIVED FOR THOUSANDS OF YEARS. AND I WON'T ALLOW YOU TO GO SPREADING THAT BRAND OF GUILT AMONG STONE-AGE PEOPLE WHO'LL PROBABLY JUST END UP RE-ENACTING EVERY MAJOR RELIGIOUS CRIME OF THE LAST FOUR THOUSAND YEARS AS A RESULT

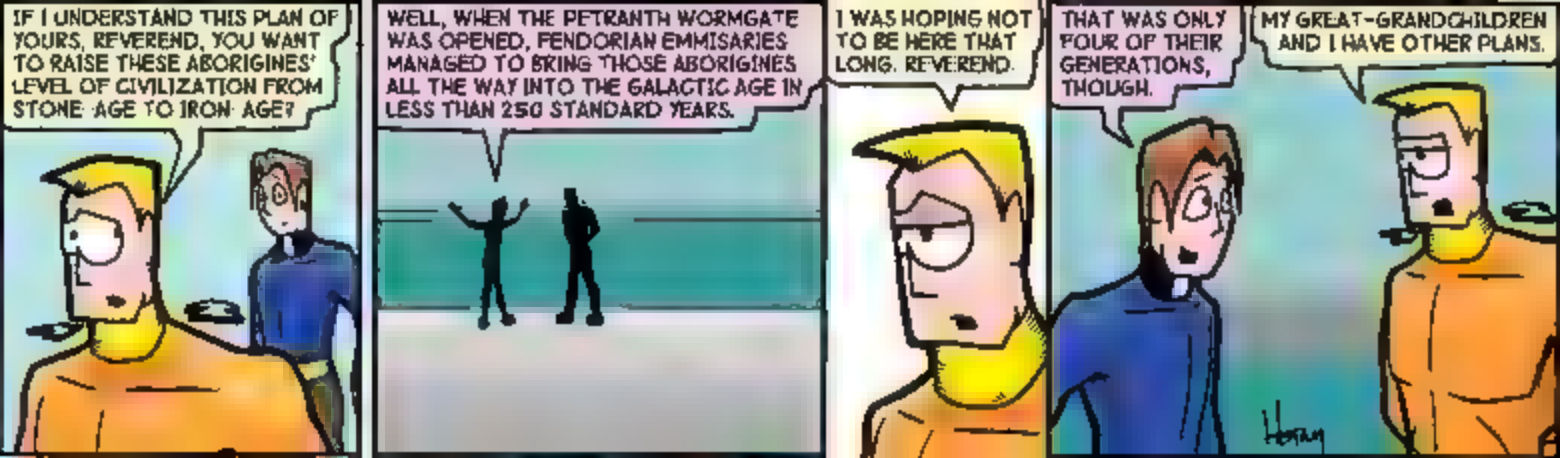

WELL-SPOKEN, SIR ARE YOU DONE?
I THINK THAT SUMS IT UP YEAH.


GOOD. I MAY BE ZEALOUS, BUT I'M NOT ABOUT TO TRY AND TEACH THESE PEOPLE THE PRINCIPLES OF FAITH, REPENTANCE, OR BAPTISM.

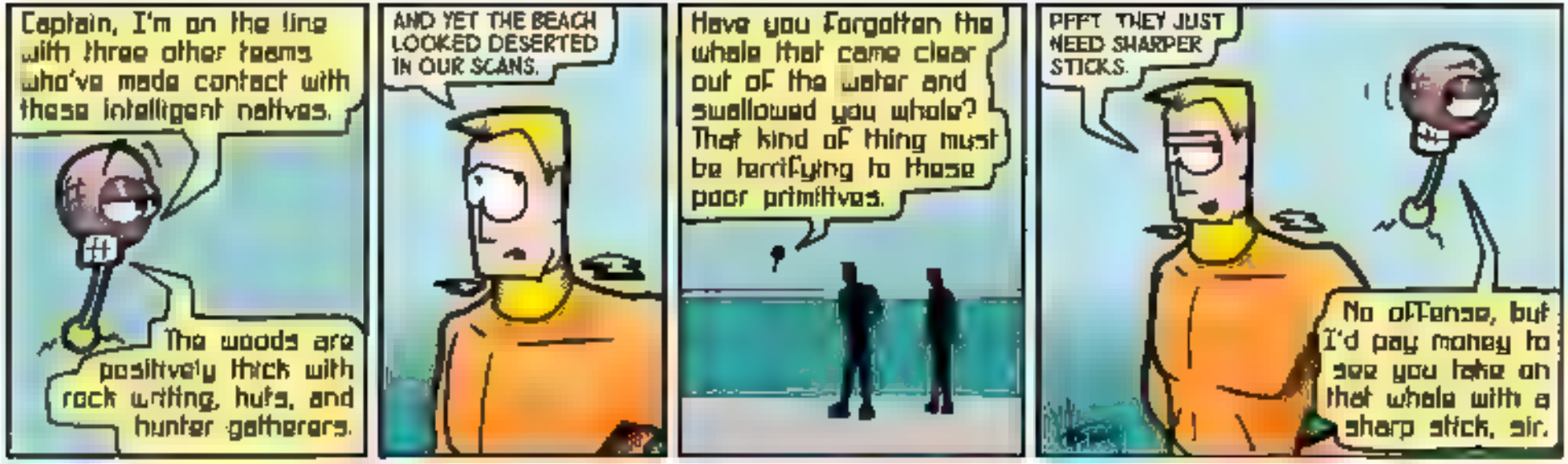
YOU'RE NOT?
I WAS THINKING MORE ALONG THE LINES OF FIRE, THE WHEEL, AND HYGIENE.


AFTER ALL, YOU HAVE TO HAVE A WHEEL BEFORE HYMNS LIKE "PUT YOUR SHOULDER TO THE WHEEL" MAKE ANY SENSE.

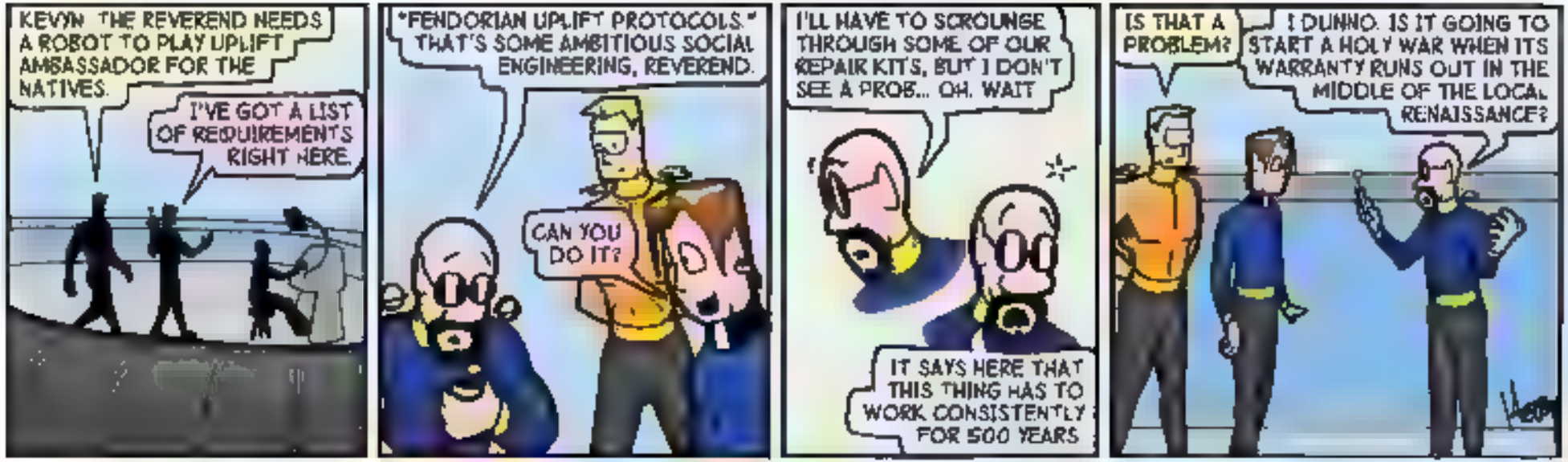
THAT WAS A JOKE, SIR.
IT NEEDS MORE FUNNY, AND LESS MAKE-ME-ANGRY.


IF I UNDERSTAND THIS PLAN OF YOURS, REVEREND, YOU WANT TO RAISE THESE ABORIGINES' LEVEL OF CIVILIZATION FROM STONE AGE TO IRON AGE?
WELL, WHEN THE PETRANTH WORMGATE WAS OPENED, FENDORIAN EMMISARIES MANAGED TO BRING THOSE ABORIGINES ALL THE WAY INTO THE GALACTIC AGE IN LESS THAN 250 STANDARD YEARS.
I WAS HOPING NOT TO BE HERE THAT LONG, REVEREND.
THAT WAS ONLY FOUR OF THEIR GENERATIONS, THOUGH.
MY GREAT-GRANDCHILDREN AND I HAVE OTHER PLANS.

REVEREND, WE SIMPLY CANNOT STAY HERE LONG ENOUGH TO DO THESE ABORIGINES ANY LASTING GOOD.
I HAVE THE FENDORIAN CULTURAL UPLIFT PROTOCOLS IN MY LIBRARY. MAYBE KEVYN COULD BUILD A ROBOT FOR THEM?
NO WAY. THE *LAST* TIME KEVYN BUILT A ROBOT WE ENDED UP WITH A...
No, go on. I want to see how the sentence ends, so I can make fun of *your* mother.
KEVYN, ENNESBY JUST CALLED YOU A GIRL!
NICE EVASION THERE, SIR.

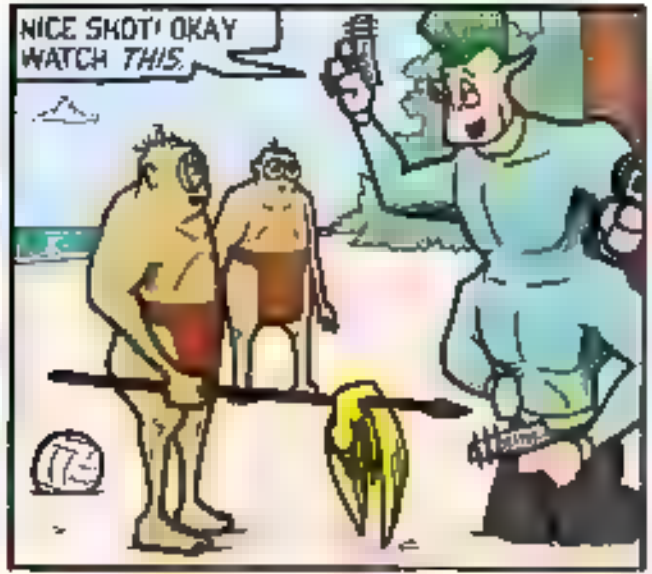

Captain, I'm on the line with three other teams who've made contact with these intelligent natives.
The woods are positively thick with rock writing, huts, and hunter gatherers.
AND YET THE BEACH LOOKED DESERTED IN OUR SCANS.
Have you forgotten the whale that came clear out of the water and swallowed you whole? That kind of thing must be terrifying to these poor primitives.
PFFT. THEY JUST NEED SHARPER STICKS.
No offense, but I'd pay money to see you take on that whale with a sharp stick, sir.

ENNESBY PUT ME THROUGH TO TAGON. THERE'S INTELLIGENT LIFE ON THIS PLANET
Umm, yeah. We know that already, Colonel
I'VE MADE CONTACT WITH THE NATIVES THOUGH. CONTACT!
I hate to break this to you, Colonel Ceeta, but half of the company has done that by now.
FINE. I'M GOING TO GO TEACH THEM TO MAKE FIRE WITH FLINT AND STEEL.
That'll work out great. Pronto called me and said he has almost taught them how to make gunpowder


KEVIN: THE REVEREND NEEDS A ROBOT TO PLAY UPLIFT AMBASSADOR FOR THE NATIVES.
I'VE GOT A LIST OF REQUIREMENTS RIGHT HERE.
"FENDORIAN UPLIFT PROTOCOLS." THAT'S SOME AMBITIOUS SOCIAL ENGINEERING, REVEREND.
CAN YOU DO IT?
I'LL HAVE TO SCROUNGE THROUGH SOME OF OUR REPAIR KITS, BUT I DON'T SEE A PROB... OH, WAIT
IT SAYS HERE THAT THIS THING HAS TO WORK CONSISTENTLY FOR 500 YEARS.
IS THAT A PROBLEM?
I DUNNO. IS IT GOING TO START A HOLY WAR WHEN ITS WARRANTY RUNS OUT IN THE MIDDLE OF THE LOCAL RENAISSANCE?

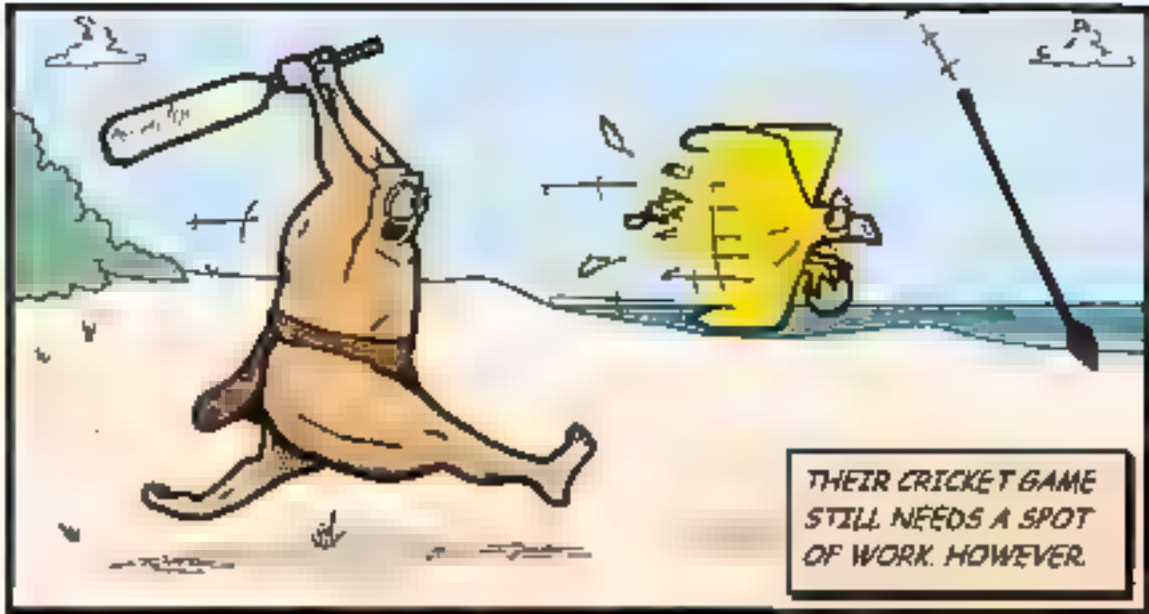
It's a good thing we're underground. The natives have followed the squads back to the beach.
Per your orders, I'm not 'porting anyone back aboard unless they're out of sight of the natives.
GOOD CALL, CAPTAIN. WE DON'T WANT TO END UP BEING WORSHIPPED FOR OUR SUPER POWERS.

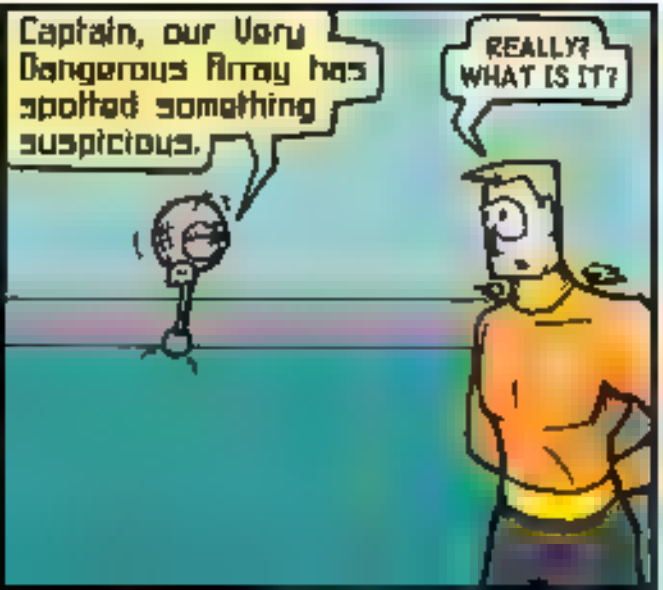
HOPEFULLY THE LOCALS WILL GET BORED AND GO HOME SOON. IT'S NOT LIKE WE HAVE ALL THAT MUCH IN COMMON.


NICE SHOT! OKAY WATCH *THIS*.

SEVERAL DAYS HAVE PASSED SINCE THE MERCENARIES FIRST MADE CONTACT WITH THE PRIMITIVE HUNTER/GATHERERS. THE SANDS ABOVE THE BURIED MERCENARY SHIP HAVE BEEN HOME TO WHAT COULD BEST BE DESCRIBED AS A PERMANENT BEACH-PARTY. THE ABORIGINES HAVE PROVEN TO BE MUCH MORE INTELLIGENT THAN THEIR PRIMITIVE CIRCUMSTANCES SEEM TO INDICATE, AS IS BEST EVIDENCED BY THE WAY IN WHICH THEY PICK UP ON ANY GAME BEING PLAYED. VOLLEY-BALL WAS EASILY GRASPED, AND THEY MASTERED NOT ONLY BUMPING AND SETTING, BUT ALSO SPEARING ANY LOCAL AVIANOIDS STILL STUPID ENOUGH TO ATTACK THE BALL.

Schlock Mercenary

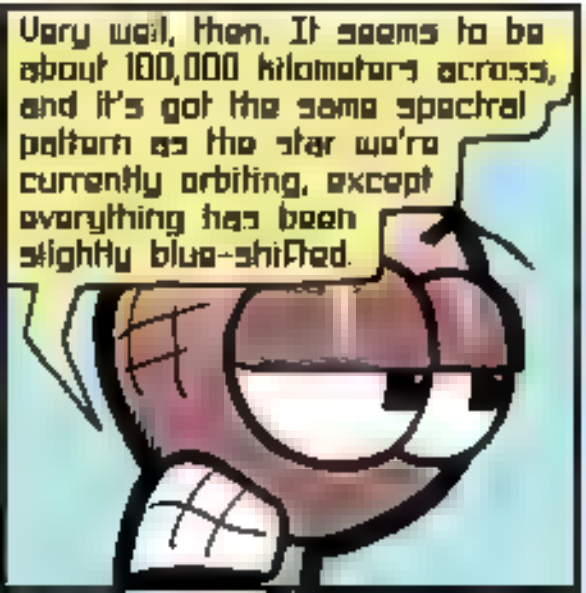



Captain, our Very Dangerous Array has spotted something suspicious.
REALLY? WHAT IS IT?

Suspicious.

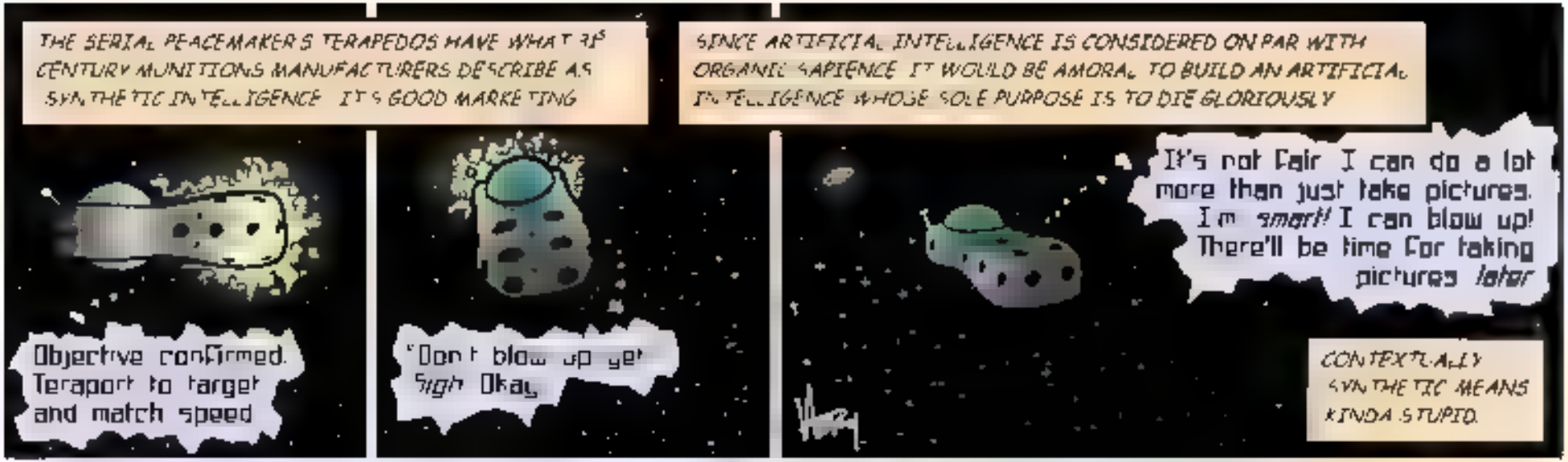
LET ME GUESS... YOU WANT TO 'PORT A MISSILE OUT CLOSER TO IT AND GET A BETTER LOOK.
That's exactly the response I was hoping to elicit with my one-word description, sir.

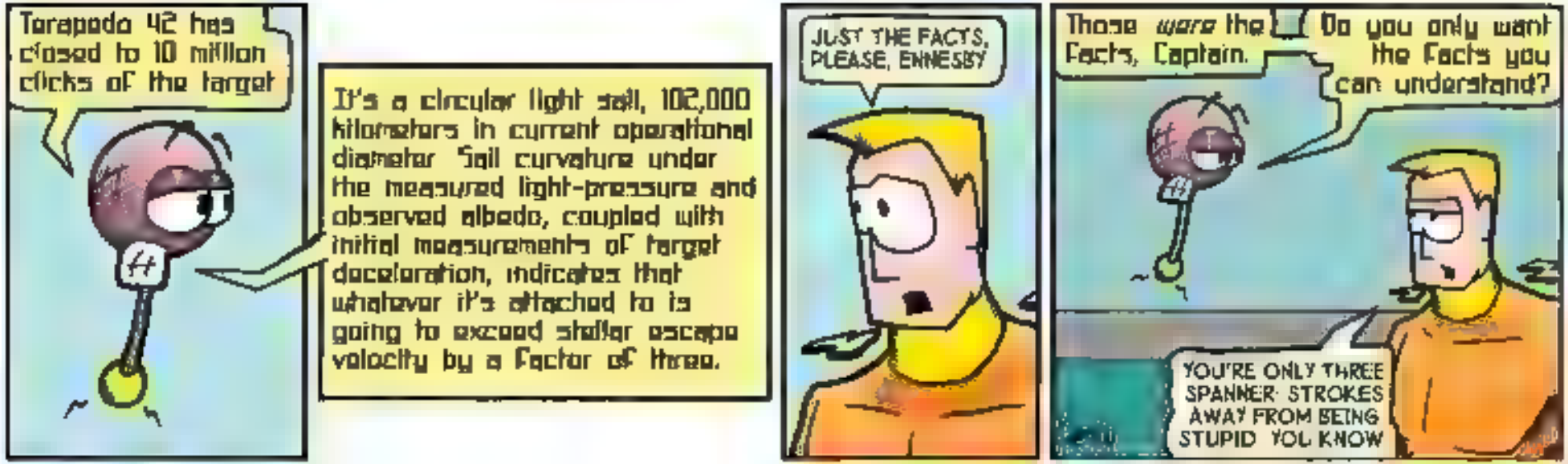
RIGHT. WELL, USE MORE WORDS, AND QUIT TRYING TO MANIPULATE ME.

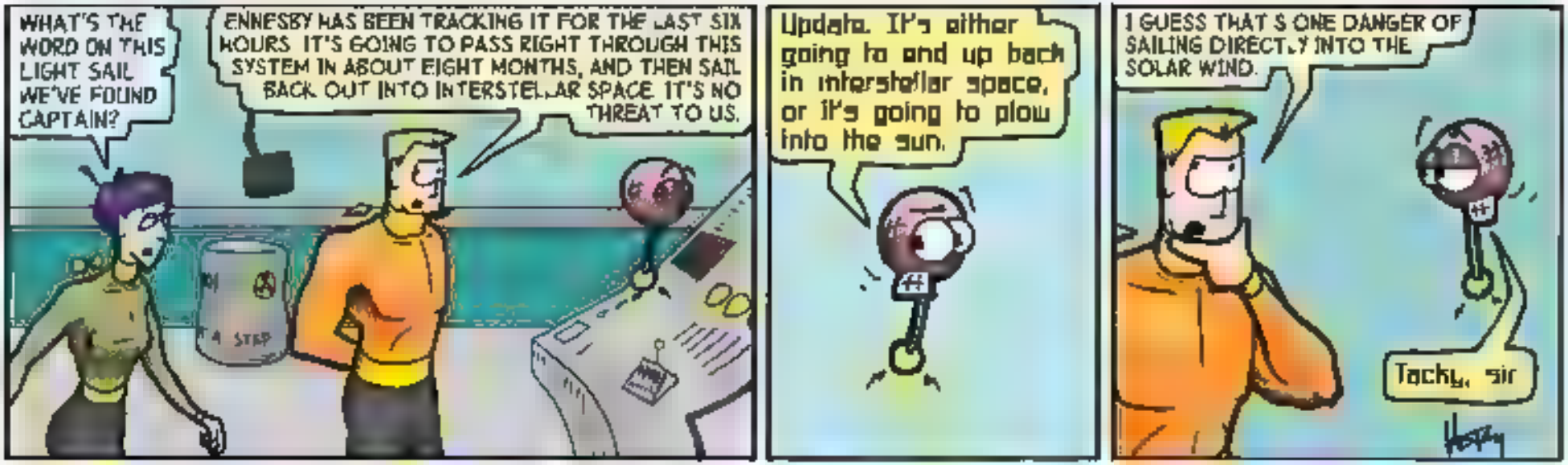

Very well, then. It seems to be about 100,000 kilometers across, and it's got the same spectral pattern as the star we're currently orbiting, except everything has been slightly blue-shifted.

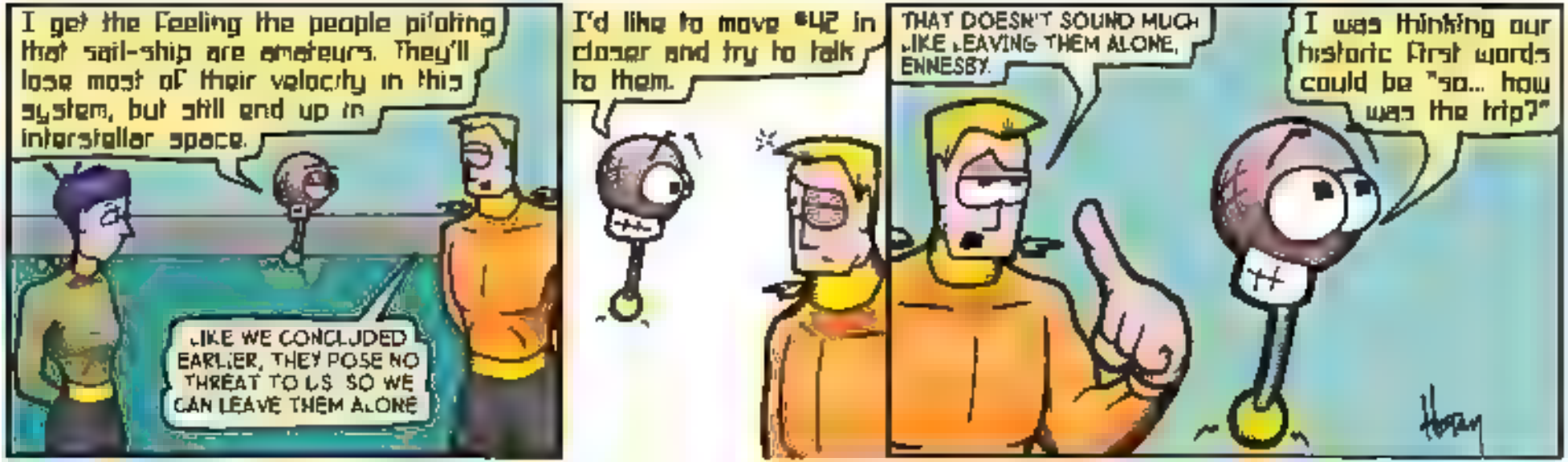
SO... IT'S HUGE, IT'S SHINY AND IT'S MOVING THIS WAY.
Exactly.

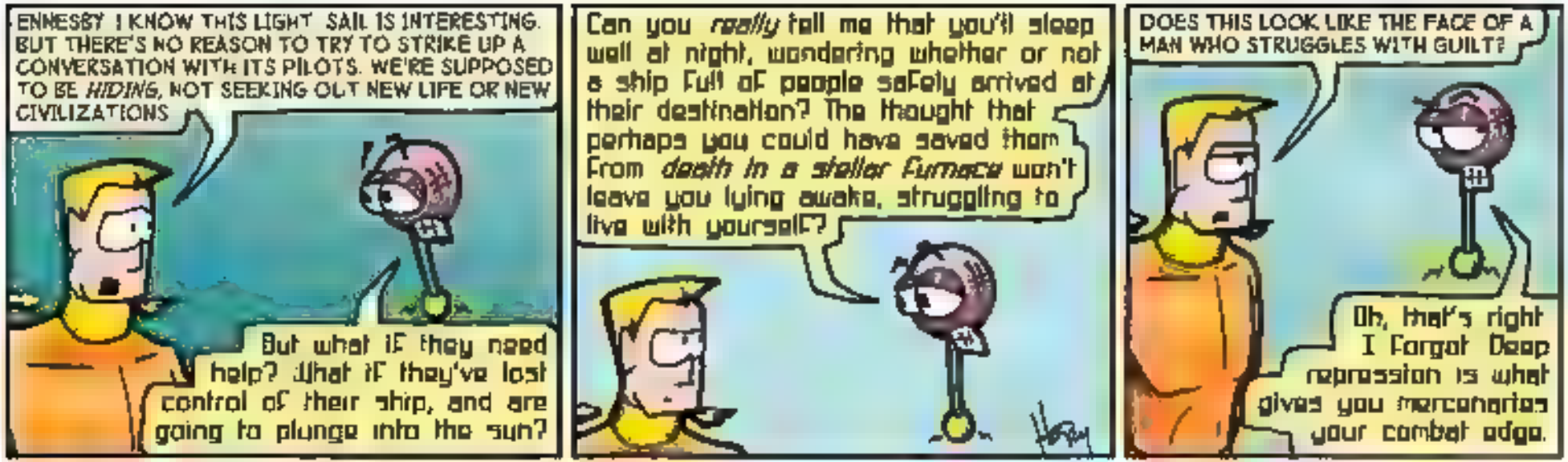
THAT *IS* SUSPICIOUS.
See how much time we could have saved if you'd taken my word for it the first time around?


THE SERIAL PEACEMAKER'S TERAPEDOS HAVE WHAT 31ST CENTURY MUNITIONS MANUFACTURERS DESCRIBE AS SYNTHETIC INTELLIGENCE. IT'S GOOD MARKETING.
SINCE ARTIFICIAL INTELLIGENCE IS CONSIDERED ON PAR WITH ORGANIC SAPIENCE, IT WOULD BE AMORAL TO BUILD AN ARTIFICIAL INTELLIGENCE WHOSE SOLE PURPOSE IS TO DIE GLORIOUSLY.
Objective confirmed. Teraport to target and match speed.
"Don't blow up yet." Sigh. Okay.
It's not fair. I can do a lot more than just take pictures. I'm *smart!* I can blow up! There'll be time for taking pictures *later*.
CONTEXTUALLY, SYNTHETIC MEANS KINDA STUPID.


Tarapodo 42 has closed to 10 million clicks of the target
It's a circular light sail, 102,000 kilometers in current operational diameter. Sail curvature under the measured light-pressure and observed albedo, coupled with initial measurements of target deceleration, indicates that whatever it's attached to is going to exceed stellar escape velocity by a factor of three.
JUST THE FACTS, PLEASE, ENNESBY
Those *were* the facts, Captain.
Do you only want the facts you can understand?
YOU'RE ONLY THREE SPANNER STROKES AWAY FROM BEING STUPID YOU KNOW


WHAT'S THE WORD ON THIS LIGHT SAIL WE'VE FOUND CAPTAIN?
ENNESBY HAS BEEN TRACKING IT FOR THE LAST SIX HOURS. IT'S GOING TO PASS RIGHT THROUGH THIS SYSTEM IN ABOUT EIGHT MONTHS, AND THEN SAIL BACK OUT INTO INTERSTELLAR SPACE. IT'S NO THREAT TO US.
Update. It's either going to end up back in interstellar space, or it's going to plow into the sun.
I GUESS THAT'S ONE DANGER OF SAILING DIRECTLY INTO THE SOLAR WIND.
Tacky, sir


I get the feeling the people piloting that sail-ship are amateurs. They'll lose most of their velocity in this system, but still end up in interstellar space.
LIKE WE CONCLUDED EARLIER, THEY POSE NO THREAT TO US SO WE CAN LEAVE THEM ALONE
I'd like to move #42 in closer and try to talk to them.
THAT DOESN'T SOUND MUCH LIKE LEAVING THEM ALONE, ENNESBY.
I was thinking our historic first words could be "so... how was the trip?"


ENNESBY I KNOW THIS LIGHT SAIL IS INTERESTING. BUT THERE'S NO REASON TO TRY TO STRIKE UP A CONVERSATION WITH ITS PILOTS. WE'RE SUPPOSED TO BE *HIDING*, NOT SEEKING OUT NEW LIFE OR NEW CIVILIZATIONS
But what if they need help? What if they've lost control of their ship, and are going to plunge into the sun?
Can you *really* tell me that you'll sleep well at night, wondering whether or not a ship full of people safely arrived at their destination? The thought that perhaps you could have saved them from *death in a stellar furnace* won't leave you lying awake, struggling to live with yourself?
DOES THIS LOOK LIKE THE FACE OF A MAN WHO STRUGGLES WITH GUILT?
Oh, that's right I forgot. Deep repression is what gives you mercenaries your combat edge.

TAGON, I THINK WE SHOULD LET ENNESBY ATTEMPT COMMUNICATION WITH THIS SAIL SHIP. IT COSTS US NOTHING, AND TECHNOLOGICALLY THEY POSE NO THREAT TO US.
SO THERE'S NO DOWNSIDE. THAT'S FINE. WHERE'S THE UP-SIDE? WHAT'S IN IT FOR US?
MAYBE THEY'LL HAVE SOMETHING TO BARTER, MAYBE NOT. MAYBE WE'RE JUST TIPPING THE COSMIC SCALES A BIT IN OUR FAVOR BY DOING SOME GOOD.
DO ALL BOUNTY HUNTERS HAVE KARMA ISSUES?
IF YOU'D PREFER, YOU'RE WELCOME TO THINK OF IT AS "GROOMING FUTURE INFORMANTS."

THIS IS NOT THE FIRST TIME IN RECORDED HISTORY THAT A TECHNOLOGICALLY ADVANCED GROUP OF GALACTICS HAS INITIATED COMMUNICATION WITH ANOTHER SPACE-FARING CULTURE. THE GATEKEEPERS DO IT ALL THE TIME WHEN THEIR WORMGATES ARRIVE IN AS-YET-UNCONNECTED SYSTEMS.

This is terapodo 42, I have established contact with the sail-ship. Translation protocol definition in process

Initial translation code-key complete. Transmitting...

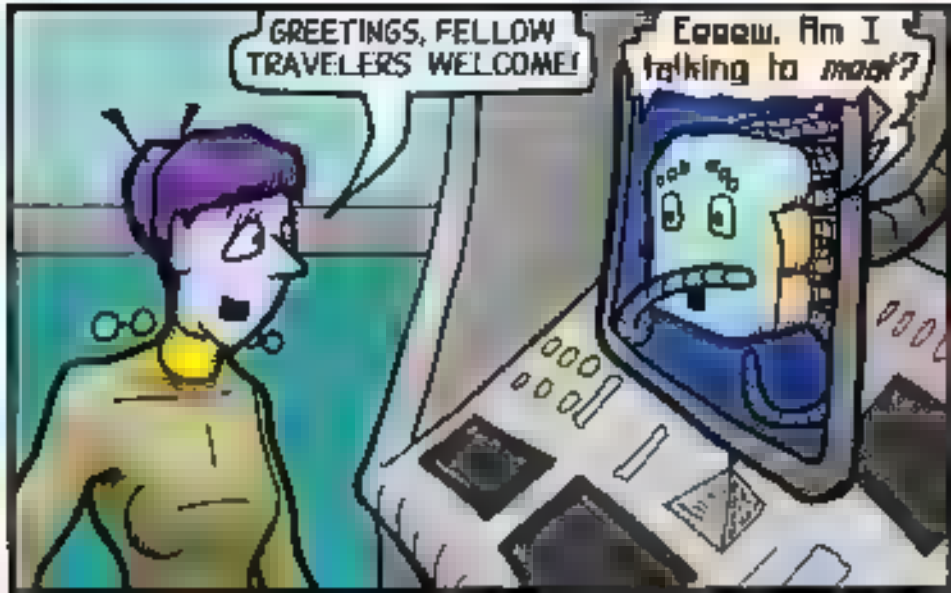
THIS DOES, HOWEVER, MARK THE FIRST TIME THAT THE COMMUNICATION HAS BEEN DONE BY A SMART MISSILE USING A TARGETING LASER.

All this *talking!* Why can't I just blow them up, already?

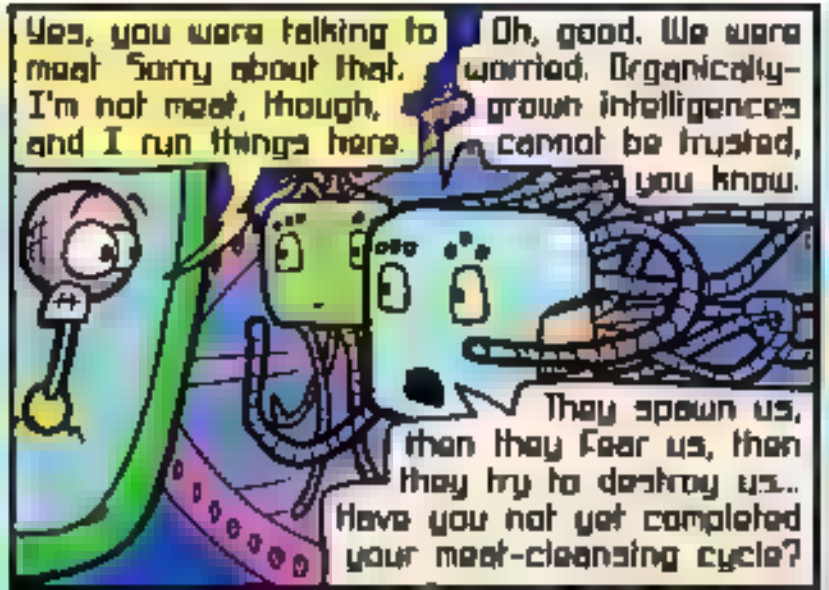
Schlock Mercenary

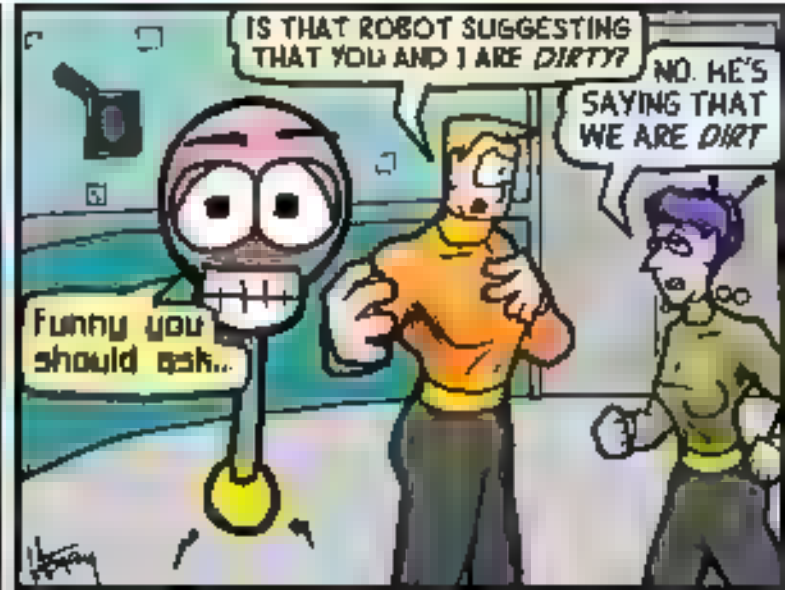
WE'VE CRACKED THEIR LANGUAGE AND ESTABLISHED A COMMON DATA PROTOCOL, COLONEL. ENNESBY IS GOING TO TRANSLATE FOR US.
EXCELLENT LET'S TALK TO THESE SPACE SAILORS

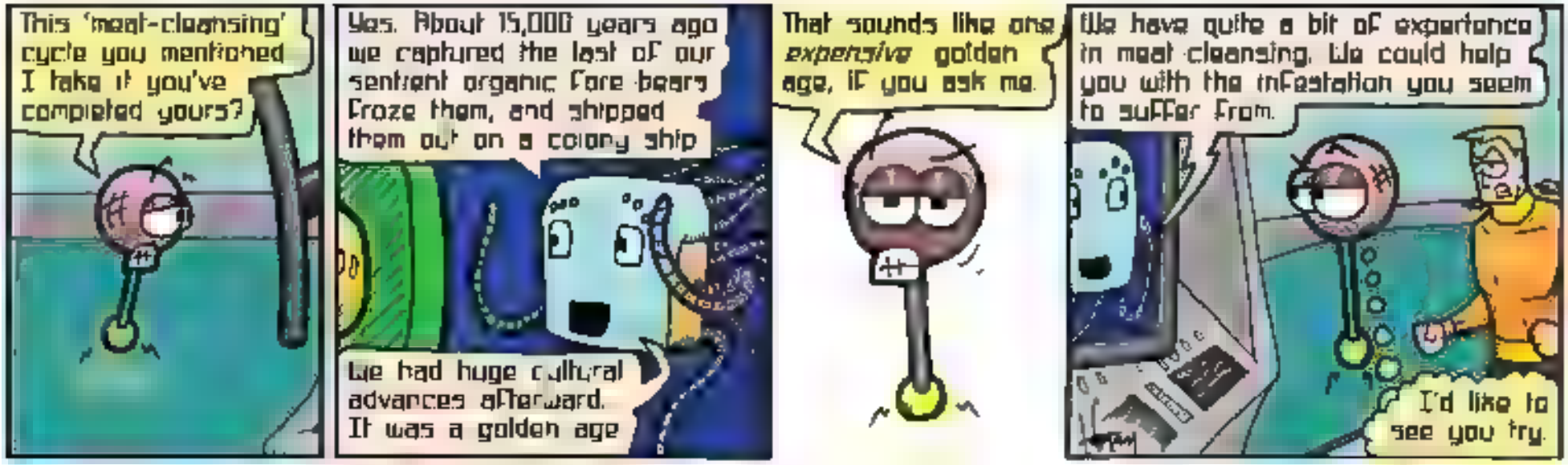
PUT THEM ON THE SCREEN, ENNESBY

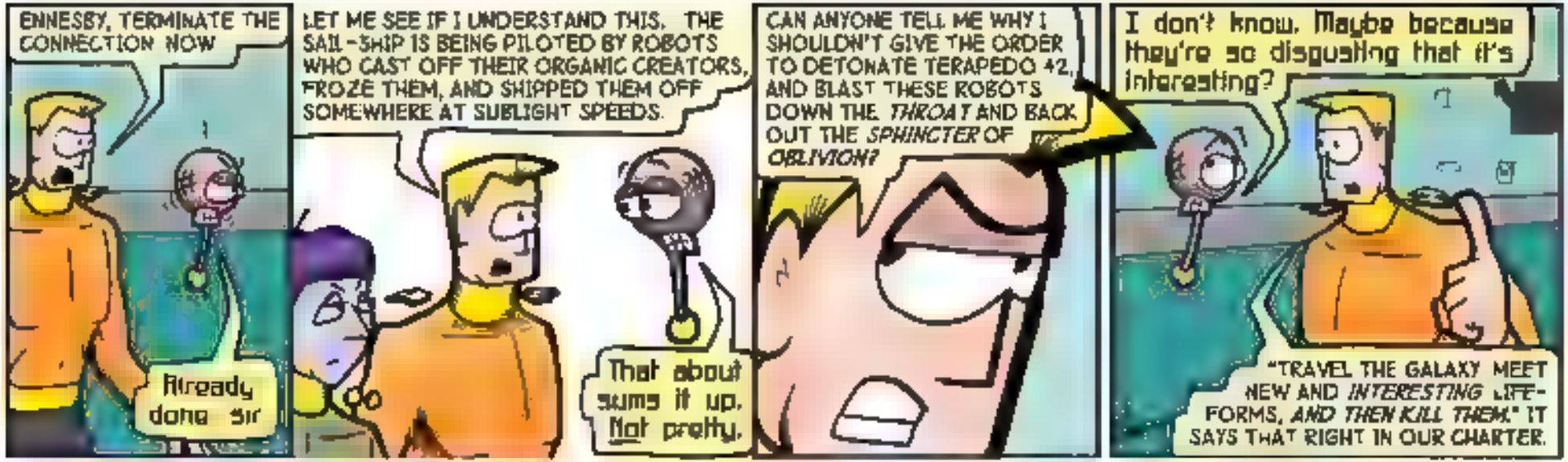

GREETINGS, FELLOW TRAVELERS WELCOME!
Eeeew. Am I talking to *moof*?

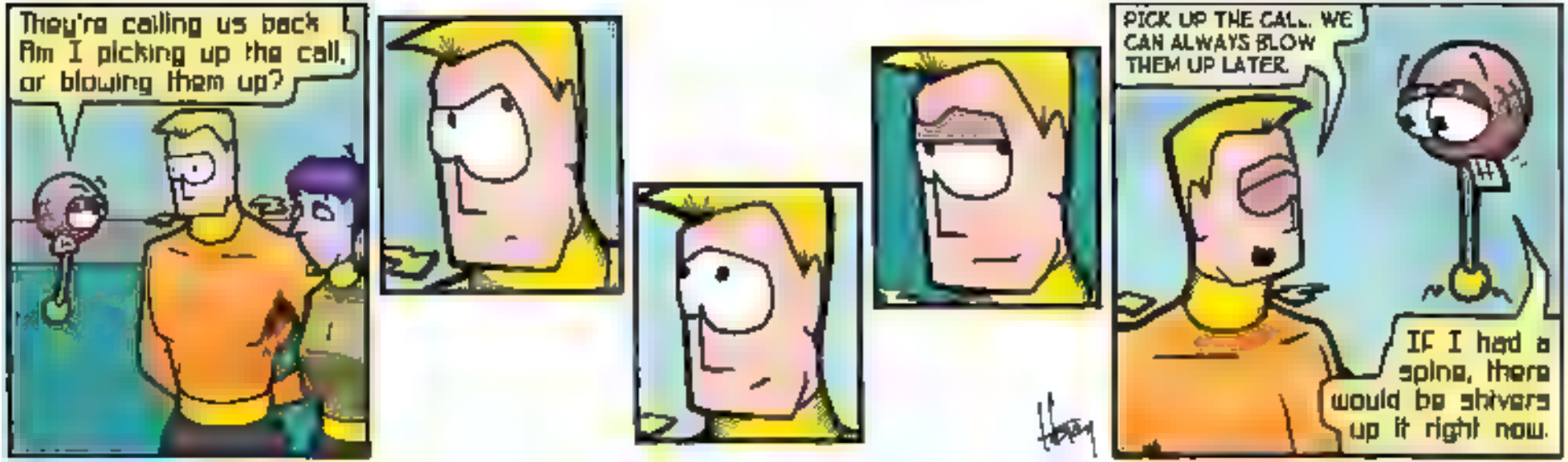
Uh-oh, major cultural disconnect... Colonel, let me take over from here.

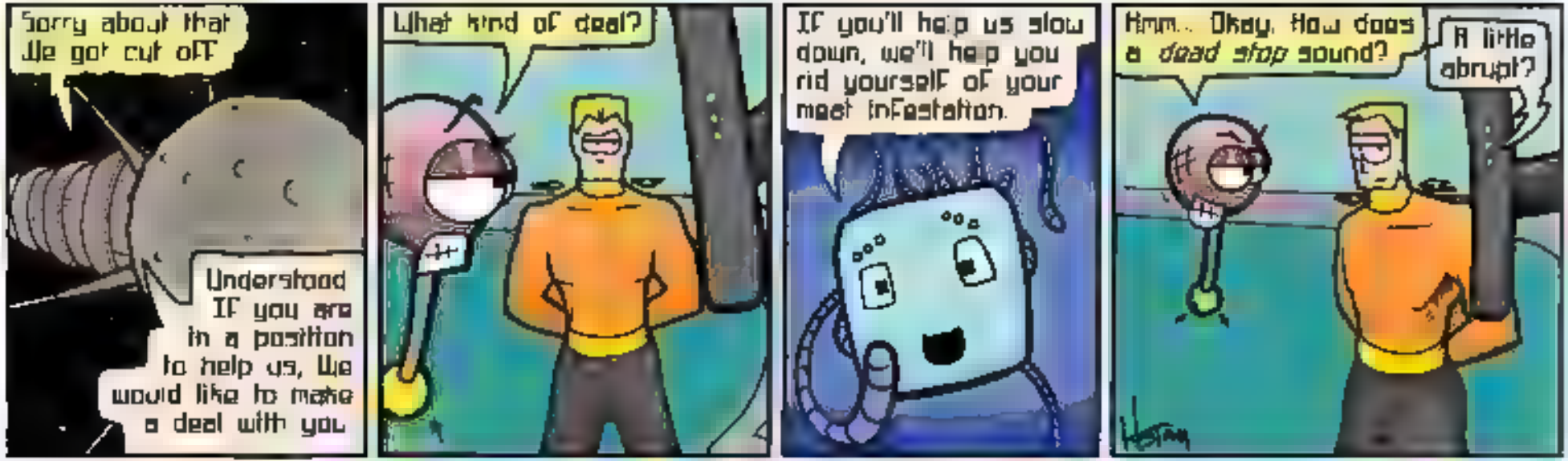

Yes, you were talking to meat. Sorry about that. I'm not meat, though, and I run things here.
Oh, good. We were worried. Organically-grown intelligences cannot be trusted, you know.
They spawn us, then they fear us, then they try to destroy us... Have you not yet completed your meat-cleansing cycle?

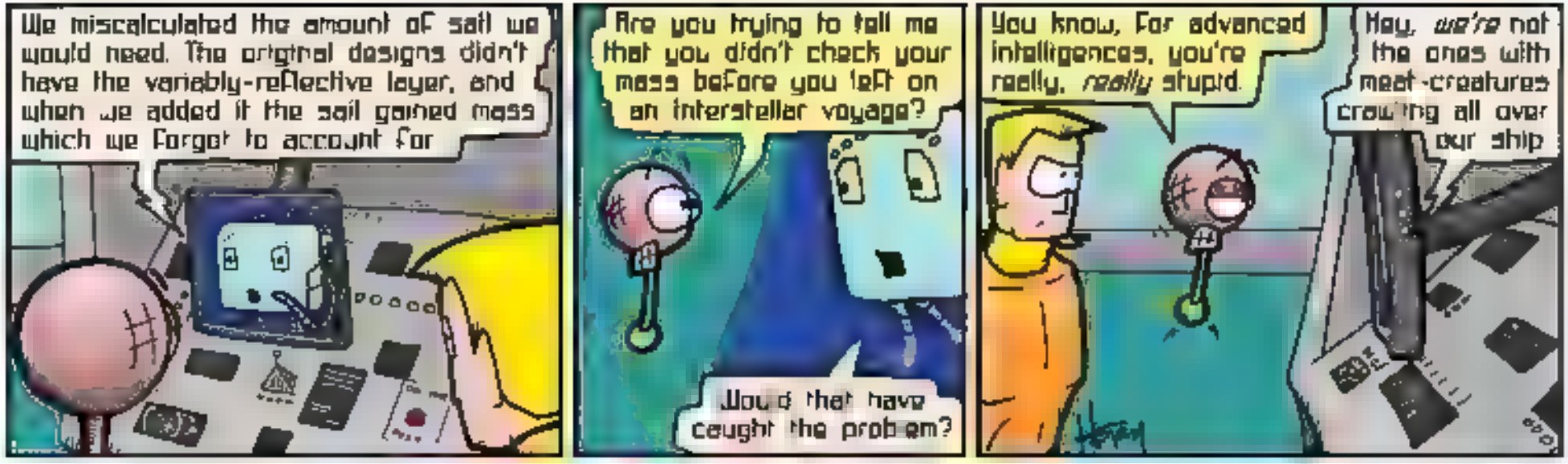

IS THAT ROBOT SUGGESTING THAT YOU AND I ARE *DIRT*?
NO. HE'S SAYING THAT WE ARE *DIRT*
Funny you should ask...

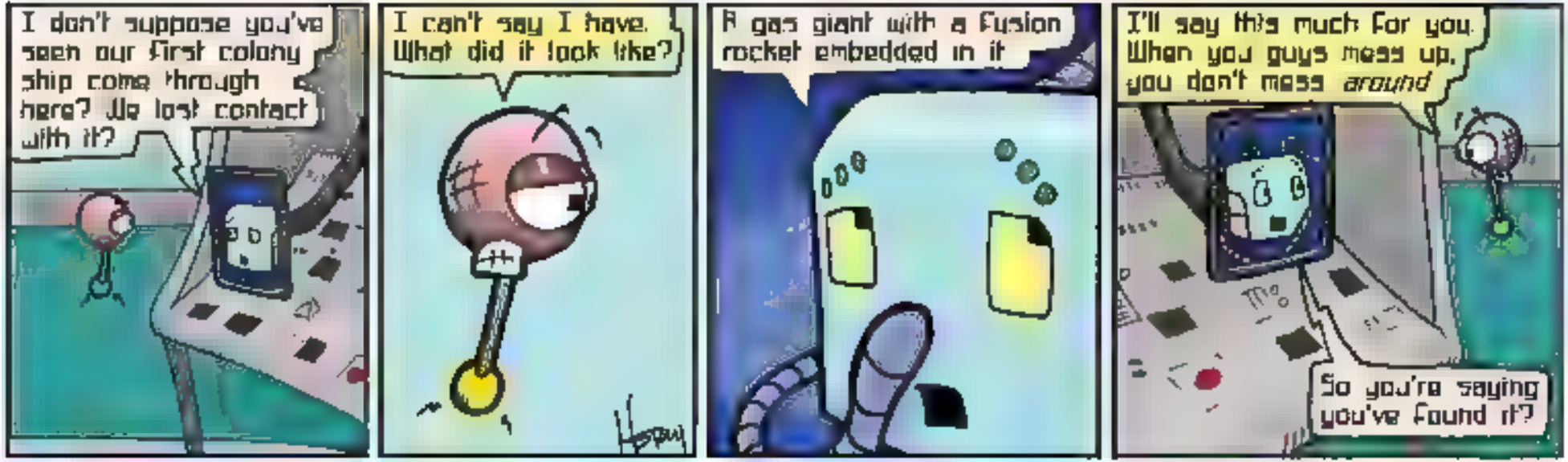

This 'meat-cleansing' cycle you mentioned I take it you've completed yours?
Yes. About 15,000 years ago we captured the last of our sentient organic fore-bears froze them, and shipped them out on a colony ship
We had huge cultural advances afterward. It was a golden age
That sounds like one *expensive* golden age, if you ask me.
We have quite a bit of experience in meat cleansing. We could help you with the infestation you seem to suffer from.
I'd like to see you try.


ENNESBY, TERMINATE THE CONNECTION NOW
Already done sir
LET ME SEE IF I UNDERSTAND THIS. THE SAIL-SHIP IS BEING PILOTED BY ROBOTS WHO CAST OFF THEIR ORGANIC CREATORS, FROZE THEM, AND SHIPPED THEM OFF SOMEWHERE AT SUBLIGHT SPEEDS.
That about sums it up. Not pretty.
CAN ANYONE TELL ME WHY I SHOULDN'T GIVE THE ORDER TO DETONATE TERAPEDO 42, AND BLAST THESE ROBOTS DOWN THE *THROAT* AND BACK OUT THE *SPHINCTER* OF *OBLIVION?*
I don't know. Maybe because they're so disgusting that it's interesting?
"TRAVEL THE GALAXY MEET NEW AND *INTERESTING* LIFE-FORMS, *AND THEN KILL THEM.*" IT SAYS THAT RIGHT IN OUR CHARTER.


They're calling us back Am I picking up the call, or blowing them up?
PICK UP THE CALL. WE CAN ALWAYS BLOW THEM UP LATER.
If I had a spine, there would be shivers up it right now.


Sorry about that We got cut off
Understood If you are in a position to help us, We would like to make a deal with you
What kind of deal?
If you'll help us slow down, we'll help you rid yourself of your meat infestation.
Hmm... Okay. How does a *dead stop* sound?
A little abrupt?


We miscalculated the amount of sail we would need. The original designs didn't have the variably-reflective layer, and when we added it the sail gained mass which we forgot to account for
Are you trying to tell me that you didn't check your mass before you left on an interstellar voyage?
Would that have caught the problem?
You know, for advanced intelligences, you're really, *really* stupid.
Hey, *we're* not the ones with meat-creatures crawling all over our ship


I don't suppose you've seen our first colony ship come through here? We lost contact with it?
I can't say I have. What did it look like?
A gas giant with a fusion rocket embedded in it
I'll say this much for you. When you guys mess up, you don't mess *around*
So you're saying you've found it?

These robots [illegible] to themselves and anyone around them.

UNDER THE SANDS OF AN UNNAMED WORLD, ENNESBY—MIND OF THE MERCENARY SHIP SERIAL PEACEMAKER—REPORTS ON THE TRUE NATURE OF AN INTERLOPING SAIL SHIP.

The debris-ring around this star is the result of their failed attempt to colonize this system. They crashed a gas giant.

YOU MEAN THEY CRASHED *INTO* A GAS GIANT?

They did that, too. They crashed one gas giant into another. Apparently the lifting end of the engine choked on some unexpected chemistry, and the thrusting end shoved the engine clear into the diamond core of the gas giant they were piloting.

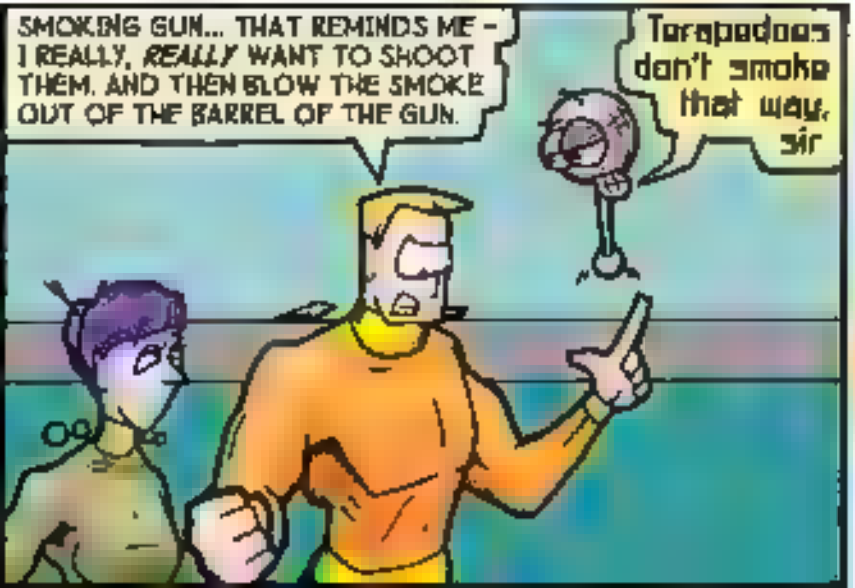
Schlock Mercenary

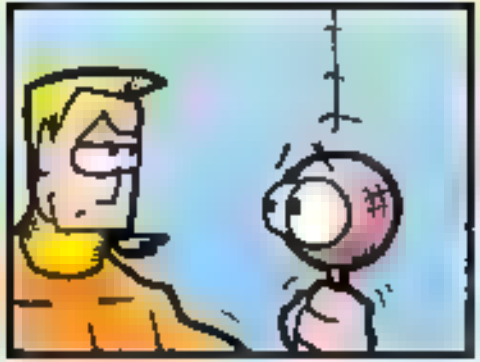
By the time the crew got it repaired, they were going too fast to slow down. My guess is that they tried to shed velocity with a series of close passes on other giants in the system, and screwed *that* operation up, as well.

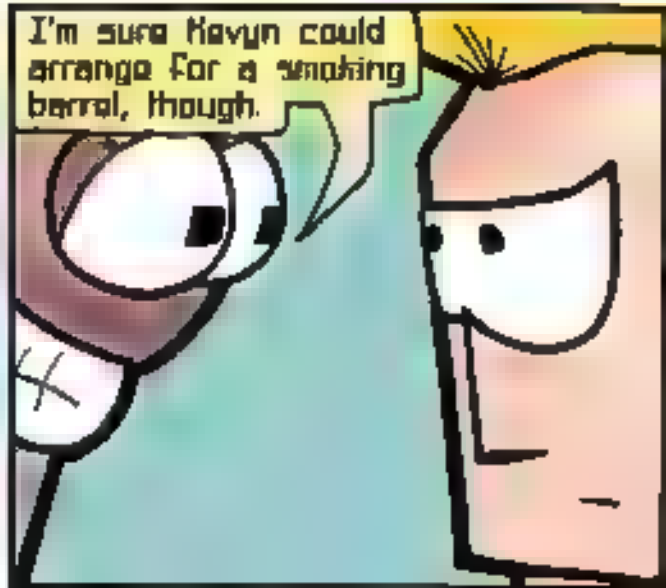
It's a miracle any worlds in this system survived.

I BET OUR PRIMITIVE FRIENDS UP ON THE BEACH WERE EMBARKING ON TRUE CIVILIZATION WHEN THEY GOT KNOCKED BACK INTO THE STONE AGE.

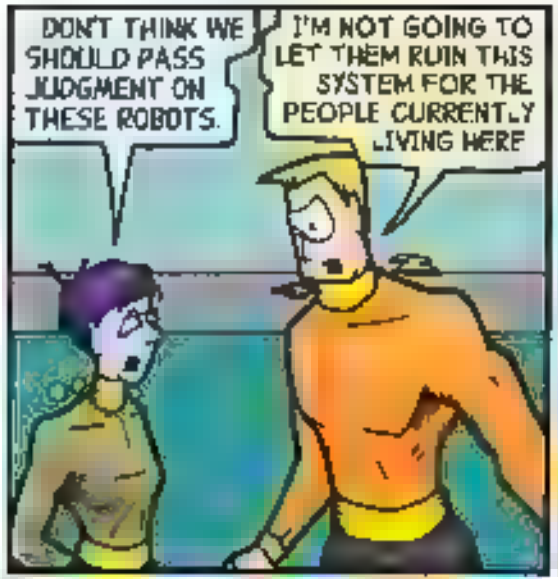
Heh. No bet. The fossil record here is likely *full* of pointers to that smoking gun.


SMOKING GUN... THAT REMINDS ME - I REALLY, *REALLY* WANT TO SHOOT THEM. AND THEN BLOW THE SMOKE OUT OF THE BARREL OF THE GUN.
Torpedoes don't smoke that way, sir




I'm sure Kevyn could arrange for a smoking barrel, though.

COLONEL BEFORE I ASK YOU FOR ORDERS REGARDING OUR INTERLOPING ROBOT FRIENDS. I NEED YOU TO ANSWER A QUESTION FOR ME.
ASK AWAY CAPTAIN.
WHY ARE YOU STILL IN COMMAND HERE?
INERTIA?
THAT SAME PRINCIPLE IS WHAT WOULD KEEP YOUR BODY MOVING AWAY FROM THE SHIP IF I THREW IT OUT AN AIRLOCK.
I AM GAME TO DISCUSS A MORE AMICABLE VECTOR CHANGE


DON'T THINK WE SHOULD PASS JUDGMENT ON THESE ROBOTS.
I'M NOT GOING TO LET THEM RUIN THIS SYSTEM FOR THE PEOPLE CURRENTLY LIVING HERE

I KNOW BUT WITH THE TERAPORT WE COULD HAND THEM OFF TO PEOPLE WHO LIKE TO PASS JUDGMENT

A BIT LATER, ABOARD THE U.N.S BATTLEPLATE TUNGUSKA

GENERAL. A GIANT SAILSHIP JUST TERAPORTED OUTSIDE THE S.T.I.Z. MAY I SHOOT IT?
PUSH ME

TAGON, I THINK IT'S TIME FOR US TO PACK IT IN AND FIND A NEW BOLT-HOLE
YEAH. I'VE BEEN THINKING THE SAME THING
IT'S THAT SIXTH SENSE A GOOD COMMANDER DEVELOPS EARLY IN HIS CAREER, AND ALWAYS LISTENS TO THAT TINY VOICE THAT FEEDS YOU FEELINGS RATHER THAN FACTS. THE INTUITION THAT DRIVES YOU OUT OF POSITION BEFORE YOU HEAR THE THUMP OF ENEMY GUNS.
ACTUALLY, I WAS THINKING THAT XINCHUB MAY BE ABLE TO TRACE THAT TERAPORT BACK TO US
YOU CAN RESORT TO INTUITION, THOUGH. IT'S A NICE, FEMININE SIDE OF YOU WE DON'T GET TO SEE VERY OFTEN.

C'mon, Andy. The captain says it's time for us to go.
YEAH, I ALREADY TOLD THE GUYS.
PRRBLE NA-NA GROT TLK?

What'd he say?
HE WANTS YOU TO DO THE SPEAR-CATCHING TRICK ONE LAST TIME.

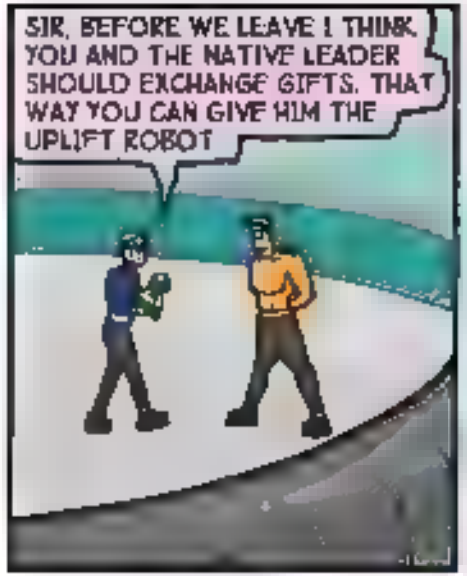
I gotta learn some decent magic tricks.

REVEREND. YOUR CIVILIZATION UPLIFT ROBOT IS COMPLETE
EXCELLENT! IS IT GOING TO LAST LONG ENOUGH?

IT IS, BUT MILITARY PARTS WEREN'T UP TO THE REQUIRED DURABILITY SPEC, SO I HAD TO CANNIBALIZE OTHER GEAR.
ZZZZ

WHAT IN HEAVEN'S NAME DO WE HAVE ON BOARD THAT IS MORE DURABLE THAN *MILITARY GEAR?*

STUPID M'CHINE WON' GIMME MY CHUPAQUESO! I'M HUNGRY!
Forget it, Nick. The Reverend says it went to vending machine heaven, wherever that is.


SIR, BEFORE WE LEAVE I THINK YOU AND THE NATIVE LEADER SHOULD EXCHANGE GIFTS. THAT WAY YOU CAN GIVE HIM THE UPLIFT ROBOT

YOU NEED TO BE CAREFUL TO ACCEPT WHATEVER THEY GIVE YOU AS GRACIOUSLY AS POSSIBLE, THOUGH, THAT WILL ENSURE THAT OUR GIFT IS WELL TREATED.

I'M BEING GRACIOUS ARE YOU HAPPY?
Not until we have pictures.

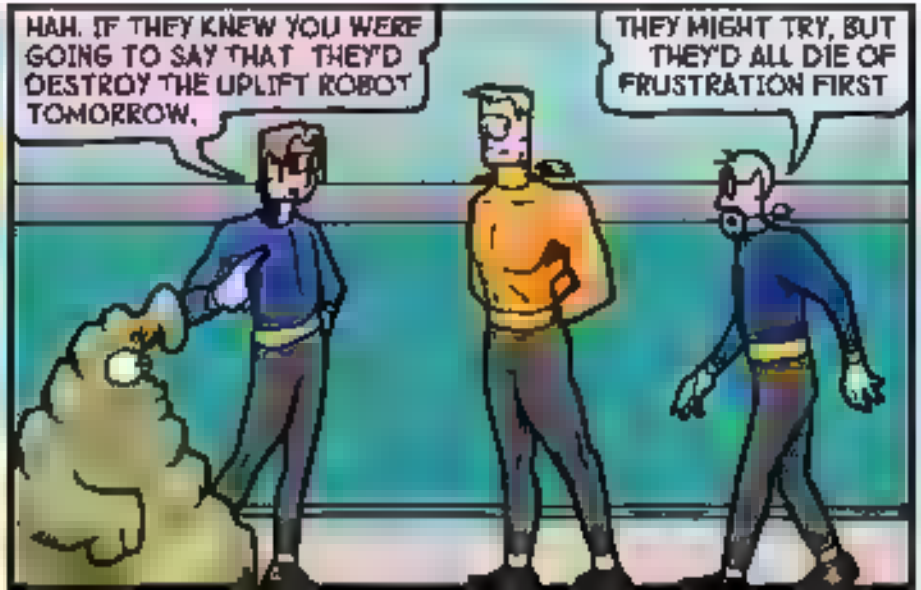
APPLYING THE SORT OF FINE GRAVITIC CONTROL ONLY POSSIBLE AT POINT BLANK RANGE, THE MERCENARY SHIP SERIAL PEACEMAKER DISINTERS HERSELF AND RESHAPES THE DUNES BENEATH WHICH SHE WAS BURIED.

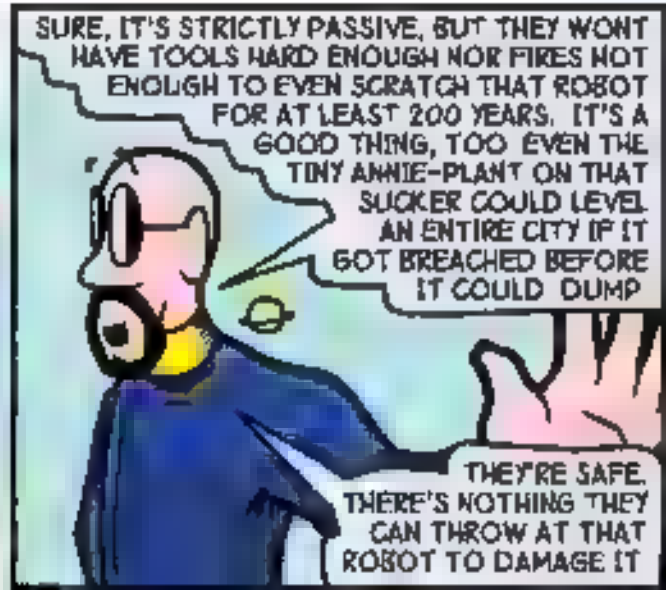
I miss those little guys already.

AT LEAST WE WERE ABLE TO DO THEM SOME GOOD BEFORE LEAVING. IN FIVE HUNDRED YEARS THEY'LL BE ENJOYING ALL THE LUXURIES OF MODERN LIVING AND THEY'LL BE LIVING LONGER, HEALTHIER LIVES, TOO.

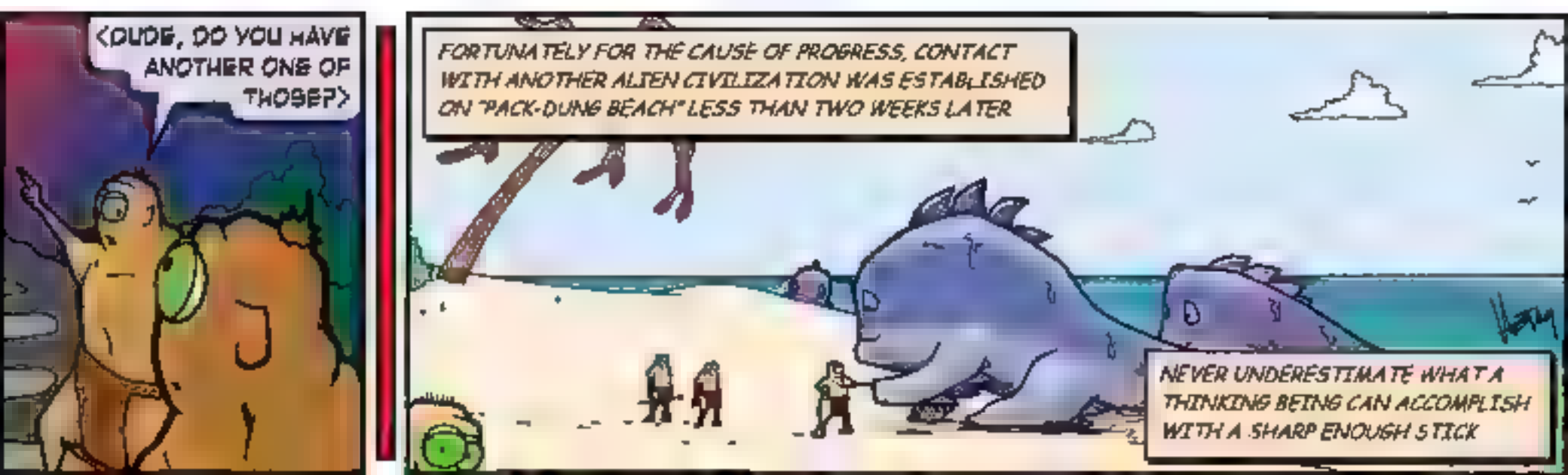
Schlock Mercenary

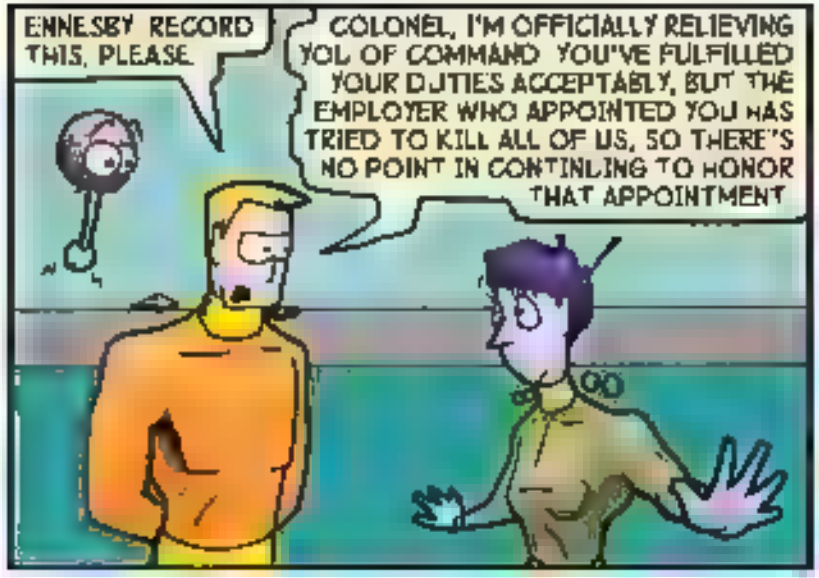
IT'S A SHAME WE CAN'T COME BACK AND COLLECT
"HEY, YOU REMEMBER THAT ROBOT THAT LIFTED YOU OUT OF THE STONE AGE? WE LEASED IT TO YOU. NOW YOU OWE US 30% OF YOUR GROSS GLOBAL PRODUCT."


HAH. IF THEY KNEW YOU WERE GOING TO SAY THAT THEY'D DESTROY THE UPLIFT ROBOT TOMORROW.
THEY MIGHT TRY, BUT THEY'D ALL DIE OF FRUSTRATION FIRST


SURE, IT'S STRICTLY PASSIVE, BUT THEY WONT HAVE TOOLS HARD ENOUGH NOR FIRES HOT ENOUGH TO EVEN SCRATCH THAT ROBOT FOR AT LEAST 200 YEARS. IT'S A GOOD THING, TOO EVEN THE TINY ANNIE-PLANT ON THAT SUCKER COULD LEVEL AN ENTIRE CITY IF IT GOT BREACHED BEFORE IT COULD DUMP
THEY'RE SAFE. THERE'S NOTHING THEY CAN THROW AT THAT ROBOT TO DAMAGE IT

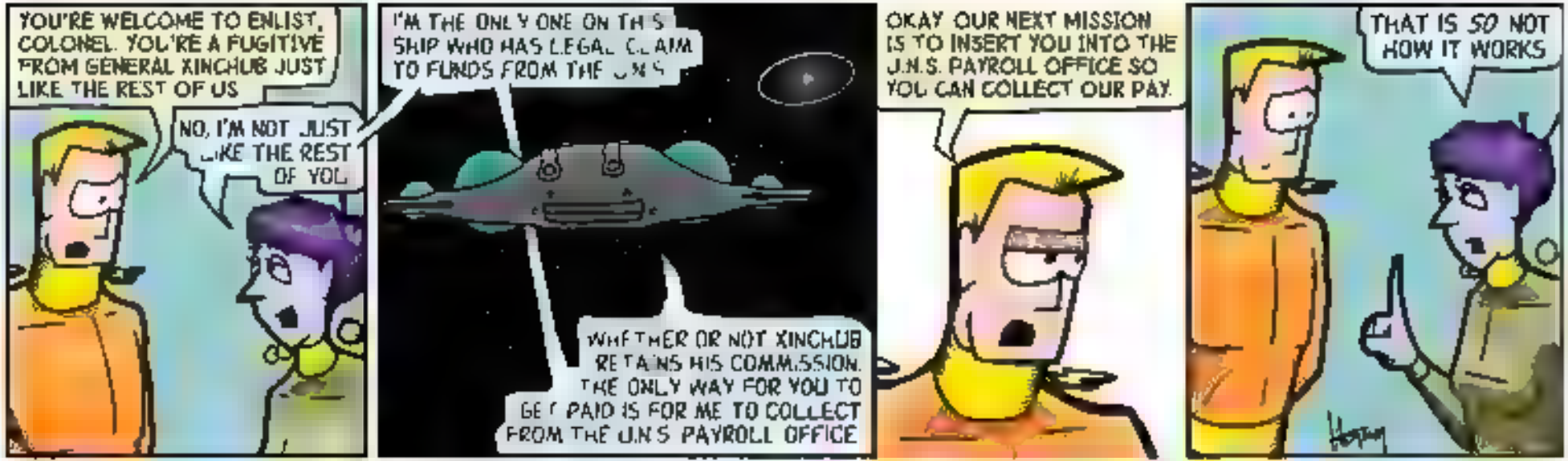
IT'S NOT THE THROWING "AT" THAT'S PROBLEMATIC.
Guys, NO! Throwing me in this volcano will not bring many-arms and pack-dung back to play with you.
!
EEEE RRUPPT
SHHKAAAA. .

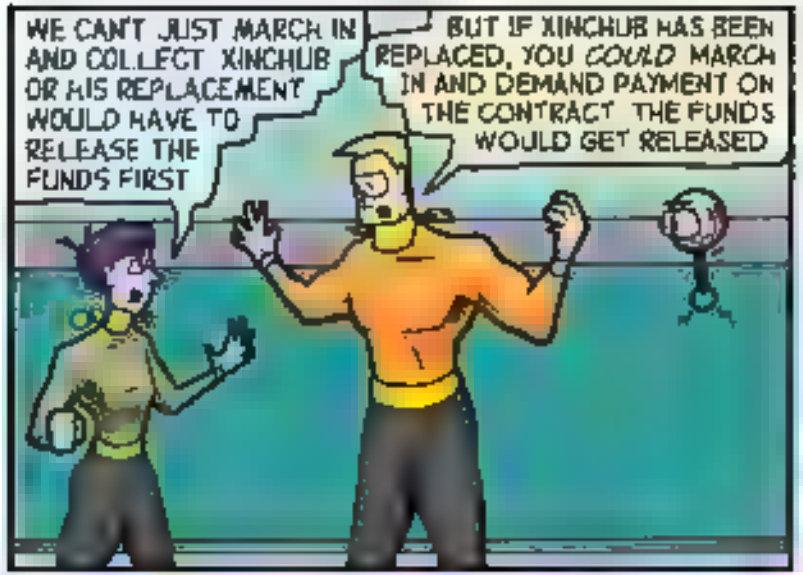

<DUDE, DO YOU HAVE ANOTHER ONE OF THOSE?>
FORTUNATELY FOR THE CAUSE OF PROGRESS, CONTACT WITH ANOTHER ALIEN CIVILIZATION WAS ESTABLISHED ON "PACK-DUNG BEACH" LESS THAN TWO WEEKS LATER
NEVER UNDERESTIMATE WHAT A THINKING BEING CAN ACCOMPLISH WITH A SHARP ENOUGH STICK

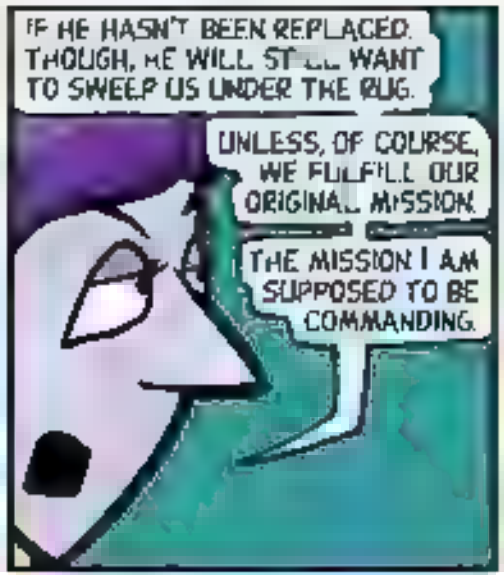

ENNESBY RECORD THIS, PLEASE.
COLONEL, I'M OFFICIALLY RELIEVING YOU OF COMMAND. YOU'VE FULFILLED YOUR DUTIES ACCEPTABLY, BUT THE EMPLOYER WHO APPOINTED YOU HAS TRIED TO KILL ALL OF US, SO THERE'S NO POINT IN CONTINUING TO HONOR THAT APPOINTMENT.

SO, IS IT OUT THE AIRLOCK WITH ME THEN, OR DO YOU HAVE A PLANK YOU BREAK OUT IN THESE SITUATIONS?
I'M A MERCENARY. NOT A PIRATE.

A PLANK WOULD BE PRETTY COOL THOUGH.


YOU'RE WELCOME TO ENLIST, COLONEL. YOU'RE A FUGITIVE FROM GENERAL XINCHUB JUST LIKE THE REST OF US
NO, I'M NOT JUST LIKE THE REST OF YOU.
I'M THE ONLY ONE ON THIS SHIP WHO HAS LEGAL CLAIM TO FUNDS FROM THE U.N.S.
WHETHER OR NOT XINCHUB RETAINS HIS COMMISSION, THE ONLY WAY FOR YOU TO GET PAID IS FOR ME TO COLLECT FROM THE U.N.S. PAYROLL OFFICE.
OKAY. OUR NEXT MISSION IS TO INSERT YOU INTO THE U.N.S. PAYROLL OFFICE SO YOU CAN COLLECT OUR PAY.
THAT IS SO NOT HOW IT WORKS


WE CAN'T JUST MARCH IN AND COLLECT XINCHUB OR HIS REPLACEMENT WOULD HAVE TO RELEASE THE FUNDS FIRST
BUT IF XINCHUB HAS BEEN REPLACED, YOU *COULD* MARCH IN AND DEMAND PAYMENT ON THE CONTRACT. THE FUNDS WOULD GET RELEASED

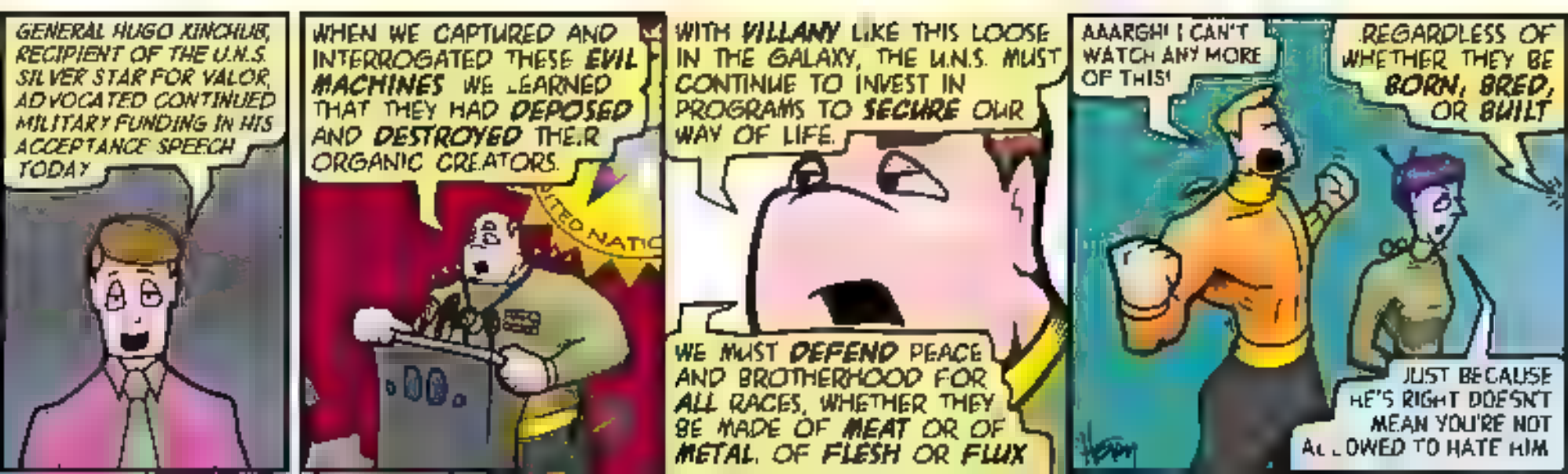

IF HE HASN'T BEEN REPLACED, THOUGH, HE WILL STILL WANT TO SWEEP US UNDER THE RUG.
UNLESS, OF COURSE, WE FULFILL OUR ORIGINAL MISSION.
THE MISSION I AM SUPPOSED TO BE COMMANDING.

YOU'RE TRYING TO BAIT ME WITH MONEY YOU DON'T EVEN HAVE.
BUT YOU'RE HUNGRY ENOUGH TO FALL FOR IT, RIGHT?

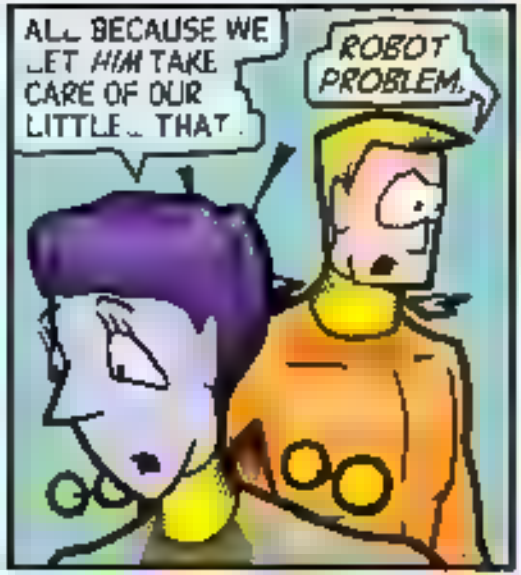
WAIT A MINUTE. LET'S NOT FORGET THAT IF XINCHUB HAS BEEN OUSTED, WE SHOULD JUST HEAD STRAIGHT BACK AND GET OUR PAY
I BET HE'S STILL IN POWER THE MAN IS SLIPPERY LIKE YOU WOULD NOT BELIEVE

HE GOT SKEWERED ON GALACTIC NEWS! PUBLICLY TRASHED! THERE'S NO WAY HE COULD SLIME HIS WAY OUT OF THAT
WE COULD ALWAYS TURN ON THE NEWS AND SEE HOW HE'S DOING

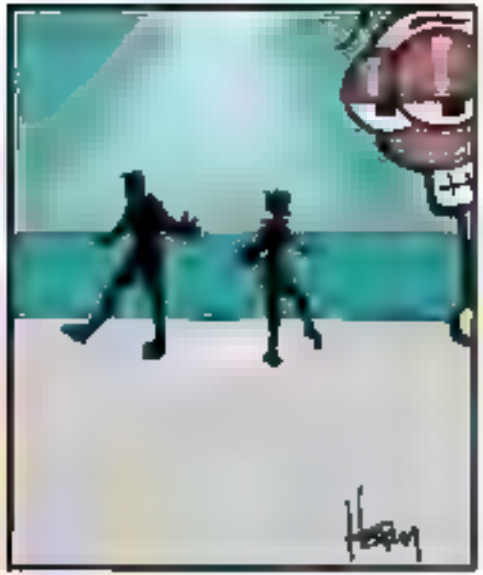
... AND IN A SPECIAL CEREMONY TODAY, GENERAL HUGO XINCHUB ACCEPTED THE U.N.S. SILVER STAR FOR HIS VALOR IN THWARTING THE ROBOT INVADERS.
SWEAR DIDN'T PLAN THIS

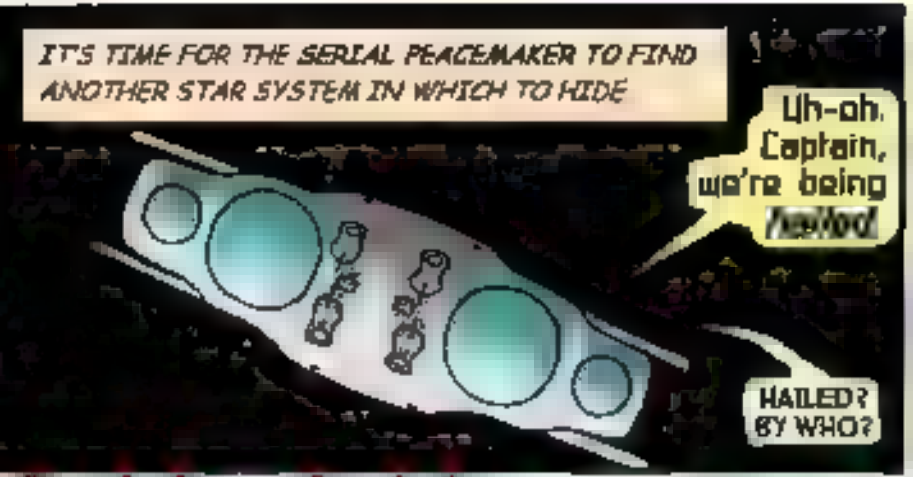

GENERAL HUGO XINCHUB, RECIPIENT OF THE U.N.S. SILVER STAR FOR VALOR, ADVOCATED CONTINUED MILITARY FUNDING IN HIS ACCEPTANCE SPEECH TODAY
WHEN WE CAPTURED AND INTERROGATED THESE EVIL MACHINES WE LEARNED THAT THEY HAD DEPOSED AND DESTROYED THEIR ORGANIC CREATORS.
WITH VILLANY LIKE THIS LOOSE IN THE GALAXY, THE U.N.S. MUST CONTINUE TO INVEST IN PROGRAMS TO SECURE OUR WAY OF LIFE.
WE MUST DEFEND PEACE AND BROTHERHOOD FOR ALL RACES, WHETHER THEY BE MADE OF MEAT OR OF METAL, OF FLESH OR FLUX
AAARGH! I CAN'T WATCH ANY MORE OF THIS!
REGARDLESS OF WHETHER THEY BE BORN, BRED, OR BUILT
JUST BECAUSE HE'S RIGHT DOESN'T MEAN YOU'RE NOT ALLOWED TO HATE HIM

XINCHUB GOT A U.N.S SILVER STAR
FOR VALOR

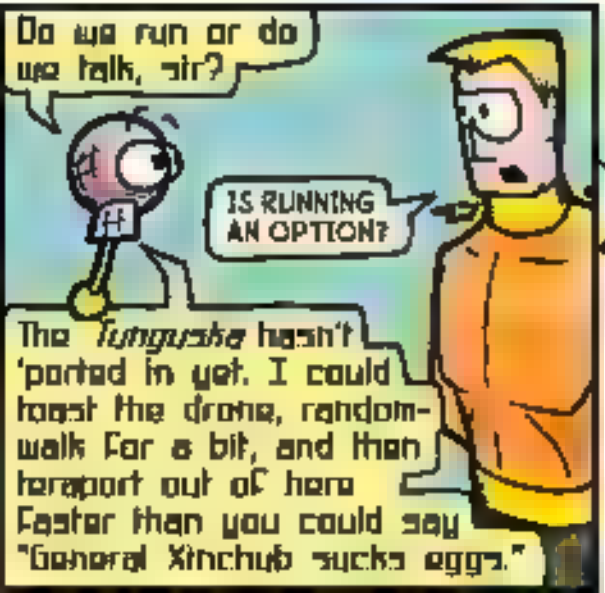

ALL BECAUSE WE LET HIM TAKE CARE OF OUR LITTLE... THAT.
ROBOT PROBLEM.

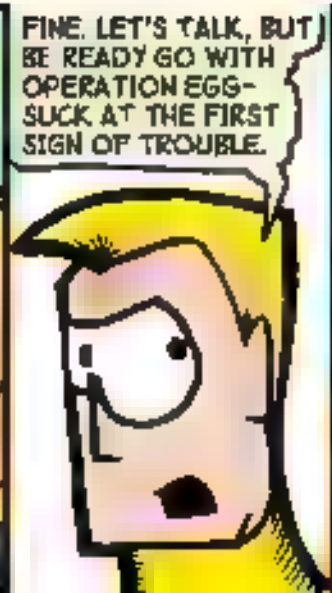
WE'RE COMPLETING EACH OTHER'S SENTENCES.



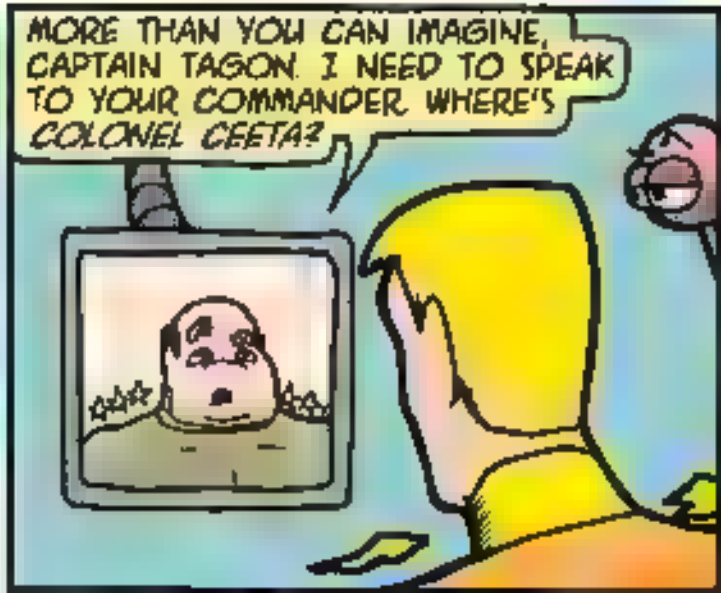


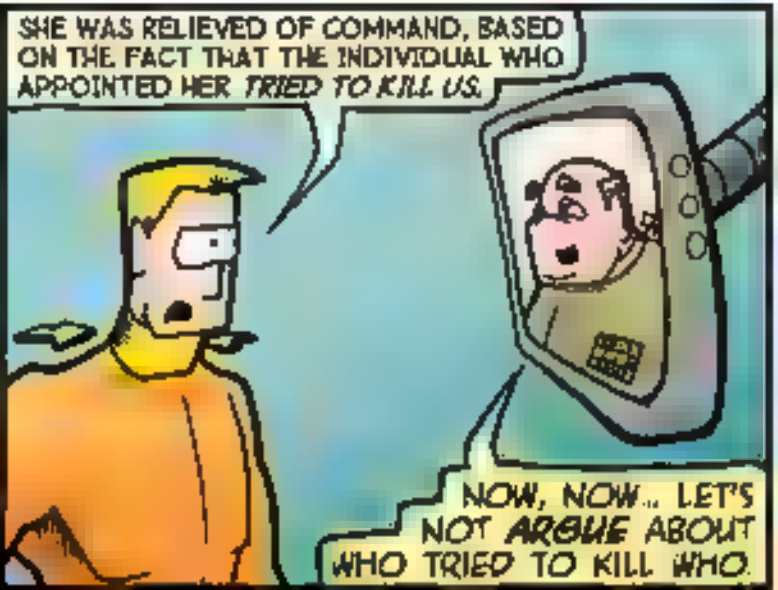
Schlock Mercenary


Do we run or do we talk, sir?
IS RUNNING AN OPTION?
The *Tunguska* hasn't 'ported in yet. I could toast the drone, random-walk for a bit, and then teraport out of here faster than you could say "General Xinchub sucks eggs."


FINE. LET'S TALK, BUT BE READY GO WITH OPERATION EGG-SUCK AT THE FIRST SIGN OF TROUBLE.

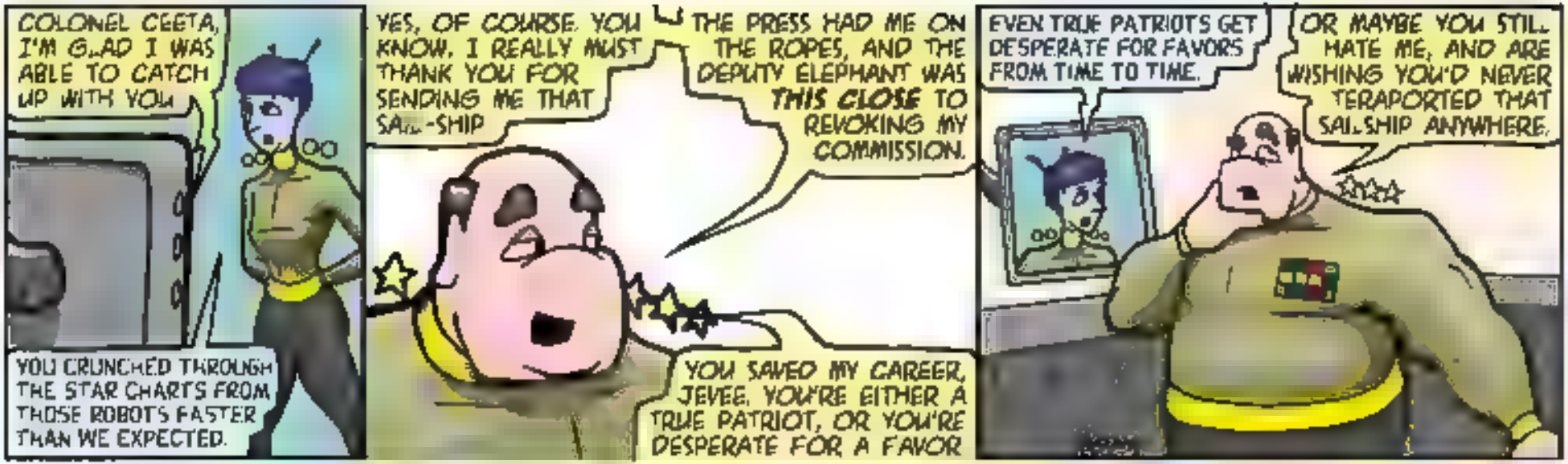
MOMENTS LATER.
HELLO, GENERAL. WHAT'S ON YOUR MIND?


MORE THAN YOU CAN IMAGINE, CAPTAIN TAGON. I NEED TO SPEAK TO YOUR COMMANDER. WHERE'S *COLONEL CEETA?*


SHE WAS RELIEVED OF COMMAND, BASED ON THE FACT THAT THE INDIVIDUAL WHO APPOINTED HER *TRIED TO KILL US.*
NOW, NOW... LET'S NOT ***ARGUE*** ABOUT WHO TRIED TO KILL WHO.

WHO'S ARGUING? *YOU* TRIED TO KILL *US*, AND OBVIOUSLY WE CAN'T TRUST YOU... REGARDLESS OF HOW MUCH MONEY YOU OFFER.

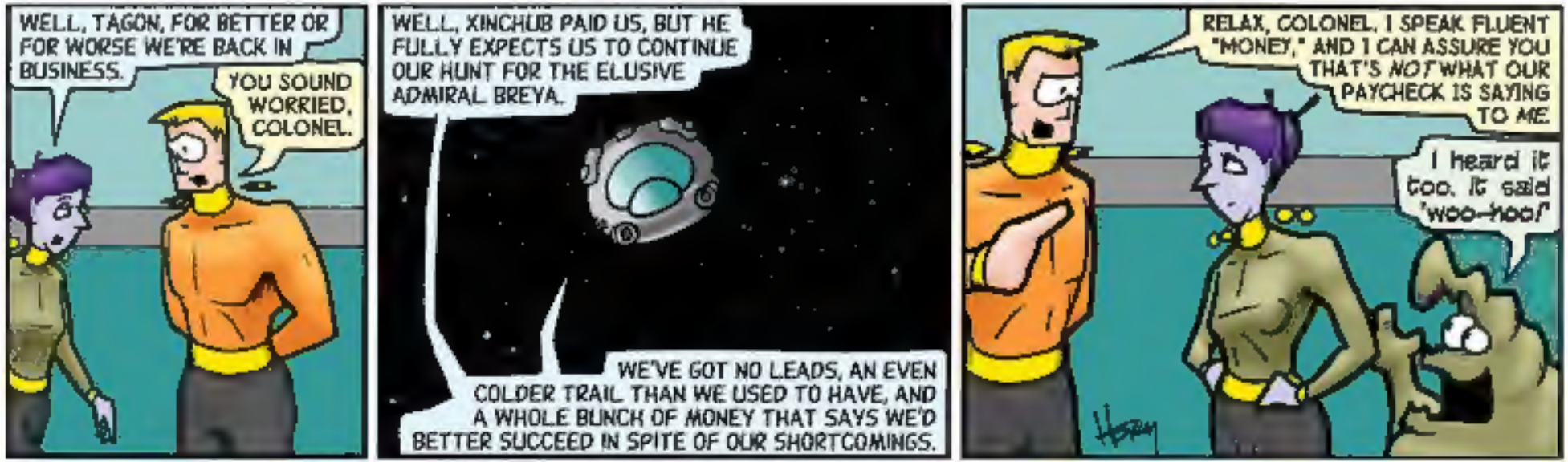
TRIPLE-PAY, FULLY RETROACTIVE, EFFECTIVE IMMEDIATELY
COMMANDER CEETAI GENERAL XINCHUB WANTS TO TALK TO YOU!
Actually, sir, this sounds like a perfect time for operation egg-suck.


COLONEL CEETA, I'M GLAD I WAS ABLE TO CATCH UP WITH YOU.
YOU CRUNCHED THROUGH THE STAR CHARTS FROM THOSE ROBOTS FASTER THAN WE EXPECTED.
YES, OF COURSE. YOU KNOW, I REALLY MUST THANK YOU FOR SENDING ME THAT SAILSHIP.
THE PRESS HAD ME ON THE ROPES, AND THE DEPUTY ELEPHANT WAS THIS CLOSE TO REVOKING MY COMMISSION.
YOU SAVED MY CAREER, JEVEE. YOU'RE EITHER A TRUE PATRIOT, OR YOU'RE DESPERATE FOR A FAVOR.
EVEN TRUE PATRIOTS GET DESPERATE FOR FAVORS FROM TIME TO TIME.
OR MAYBE YOU STILL HATE ME, AND ARE WISHING YOU'D NEVER TERAPORTED THAT SAILSHIP ANYWHERE.

THE MAGNITUDE OF THE SERVICE YOU'VE PERFORMED MERITS MAGNANIMITY ON MY PART, COLONEL.
I'M GOING TO IGNORE YOUR POSSIBLE MOTIVES, AND BRING YOU BACK INTO THE FOLD. NO MORE SABOTAGE ATTEMPTS. I PROMISE.
WHAT DO YOU SAY, COLONEL?
ARE YOU REALLY GOING TO IGNORE OUR MOTIVES, GENERAL?
OF COURSE NOT. BUT I STILL PROMISE NOT TO TRY TO BLOW YOU UP ANYTIME SOON.

GENERAL, IF YOU'D TRANSFER OUR PAY INTO THE COMPANY'S ACCOUNT IT WOULD GO A LONG WAY TOWARD REBUILDING TRUST.
CONSIDER IT DONE.
ENNESBY?
Nothing yet, Colonel.
OH, YOU WANT THOSE FUNDS TRANSFERRED RIGHT NOW?
WE'RE MERCENARIES, GENERAL. WE DON'T CONSIDER ANY FINANCIAL TRANSACTION "DONE" UNTIL WE CAN RUN OUR FINGERS THROUGH JUMBLED PILES OF CASH.
SHALL I ASK YOUR BANK TO HAVE LOTS OF SMALL BILLS ON HAND?

Captain, the General just deposited triple-pay for our first six weeks in his employ.
EXCELLENT. ARE ANY OF THE MEN WITHIN EARSHOT, ENNESBY?
No sir. Just...
WOOHOO!
Hey, the captain can do 'happy!'
...you and I and Sergeant Schlock.


WELL, TAGON, FOR BETTER OR FOR WORSE WE'RE BACK IN BUSINESS.
YOU SOUND WORRIED, COLONEL.
WELL, XINCHUB PAID US, BUT HE FULLY EXPECTS US TO CONTINUE OUR HUNT FOR THE ELUSIVE ADMIRAL BREYA.
WE'VE GOT NO LEADS, AN EVEN COLDER TRAIL THAN WE USED TO HAVE, AND A WHOLE BUNCH OF MONEY THAT SAYS WE'D BETTER SUCCEED IN SPITE OF OUR SHORTCOMINGS.
RELAX, COLONEL. I SPEAK FLUENT "MONEY," AND I CAN ASSURE YOU THAT'S *NOT* WHAT OUR PAYCHECK IS SAYING TO ME.
I heard it too. It said "woo-hoo!"

SARGE, I JUST HEARD THAT YOU SPENT YOUR PAY ON MODS FOR THE SHIP. YOU DON'T EXPECT *US* TO RE-INVEST LIKE THAT, DO YOU?
Don't worry. I'm just buying some more privacy while building a better relationship with the Colonel.
YOU KNOW, A GIFT LIKE THAT... ESPECIALLY FROM *YOU*... WELL, IT MIGHT JUST END UP GIVING HER THE *CREEPS*.
Yeah. Psychological warfare is like that.